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PAGEANT *of* MURDER



GLADYS
MITCHELL

PAGEANT OF MURDER

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PAGEANT OF MURDER

GLADYS MITCHELL

 **THOMAS & MERCER**

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A Note about this E-Book

The text of this book has been preserved from the original British edition and includes British vocabulary, grammar, style, and punctuation, some of which may differ from modern publishing practices. Every care has been taken to preserve the author's tone and meaning, with only minimal changes to punctuation and wording to ensure a fluent experience for modern readers.

To my dear Helen Brace, with love, and with many thanks
for giving me the special copy of Fred Turner's book on
Brentford

"Tout passe; l'amitié reste"

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Author's Note

All the quotations which follow the chapter headings in this book are taken from *History and Antiquities of Brentford* by the late Fred Turner, F.R.Hist.S.

CHAPTER ONE

The Special Sub-Committee Meets

"It may therefore serve a useful purpose, if, at this point, we devote a few moments to the consideration of the subject."

"It having been signified by the Council," said Councillor Topson, the chairman, "as how we are going to celebrate being made into a borough, it is our duty, being appointed the special sub-committee for arrangements, to seek ways and means to bring the said borough into public notice. The Chair is open to any suggestions."

"What about a sports day for the children?"

"Church parade of the Council, with fully-choral service?"

"Plant a tree in the park?"

"A civic dinner at *The Hat With Feather*?"

"A tea for the old folks?"

"A competition for the best front garden?"

"Open-air dancing in the park, with floodlighting and a platform for the band?"

"Historical pageant, indicating the development of the town?"

The last suggestion came from a man named Perse. He was the youngest recruit to the Council, and there were those who wished that he had never been voted in.

"Sports day for the children?" said Councillor Topson.

"That will be taken care of, anyway. Nothing takes place in

this town—soon to be a borough—*without* a sports day for the children. Have to see about prizes, that's all. Church parade? Well, naturally, the Mayor will have to be churched. It's the understood thing, so both them suggestions are in."

"What about planting a tree in the park?" persisted the woman Councillor who had suggested this. The chairman beamed at her.

"A ruddy good idea, Councillor Mrs. Skifforth," he said. "We could have a Mayor's Avenue, as time goes on. I have seen such a memorial before. *Very* effective and nice, and we'll certainly propose it. But we need something a little more lively and entertaining as well. Now, Councillor Perse, *what* was your suggestion?"

"Oh, I withdraw it," said young Mr. Perse airily. "It doesn't seem necessary, if we are to have all the other things."

"We are open to *all* suggestions, Councillor, so, if you would oblige with yours again, I'm sure members of this sub-committee would be honoured to consider of it," said the chairman, with heavy irony.

"Well, in that case, I thought that, being roughly, so to speak, on the road to Windsor, we might put on an historical pageant, showing the development of the town from a Thames-side village to its new status of borough, if you see what I mean."

"I like that idea. It's classy. But wouldn't it need words and music?"

"We've got the town band. As to words, I don't see those would be necessary. All we'd need would be a printed programme, to be sold beforehand in shops and the market, setting out the order of the pageant and what the various floats were representing."

"Councillor Band's brother runs a printing press," said the member who had proposed the church parade. "He might do the job at reduced rates, if approached official and patriotic-like."

"*And* he might not!" said the member who had proposed a tea for the old folks. "If he knows it's for the Council, it will be the reverse, if I know anything. But I like the idea of a pageant. I vote the chairman puts it to the meeting."

"If it's to be historical, then it's got to be something people have *heard* about, or had learned 'em at school," said the chairman thoughtfully.

"Such as?" asked young Mr. Perse, innocently.

"Such as Alfred and the Cakes, and Rawley and the Puddle, and all them sort of things, and they didn't take place around these parts, I don't mind betting. So what can we put on to raise the public interest? That's what this sub-committee wants to know."

"I take your point," said young Mr. Perse. "Just half a minute." He picked up the pencil which lay beside his official scribbling pad, frowned thoughtfully and then began to write. The others waited in respectful but slightly hostile silence. Mr. Perse was a graduate of London University and it was suspected (with some justification) that he was inclined to look down on those less favoured than himself.

"What about this?" he asked, putting down his pencil.

"Suppose we kick off with the Ancient Britons? They lived all over the place, so, presumably, some of them lived here."

"Too cold, these days," objected the chairman. "You can't ask people to ride all round the town with nothing on but a bit of fur round their middle."

"You've got it wrong, Mr. Chairman. I'm talking about people who lived in the Iron Age and understood all about pottery and commerce and the making and wearing of ornaments and clothes, and even a bit about money. I am not thinking of Palaeolithic or Neolithic Man."

"Oh? Oh, well, we can discuss the details later," said the chairman hastily. "Personally, I still think the Ancient Britons should be included out."

"Very well. Let's start with the Romans. They're supposed to have crossed the Thames somewhere around here."

"Ah, that's better. Very pictureskew, them Romans. Helmets and shields and all that."

"Women must be given a fair share of representation, so what about Boadicea?" suggested the woman Councillor.

"Boudicca," said young Mr. Perse, rather insufferably. "I don't think we should include her. We were all Catuvellauni around here. Boudicca belonged to and led the tribe of the Icenii, of course."

"I thought the early folks round here were all Saxons. I seem to have read that somewhere," put in the Councillor who had suggested the civic dinner at *The Hat With Feather*.

"You forestall me, Councillor," said young Mr. Perse pleasantly. "The Saxons must come into it, of course, and we really ought to follow them with the Normans. Still, as we have no Norman castle or church in or near the borough..." he smirked as he used the new and magic word..."I don't see why we shouldn't jump straight to the Crusades. The First Crusade was preached and took place in Norman times and we have no evidence that our own lord of the manor did not take part."

"Richard the Lion-Heart. Read a story about him once," said the Councillor who had proposed open-air dancing in the park.

"Yes, yes, the *Third* Crusade," said Mr. Perse, brushing it aside. "I referred to the first one."

"What happened to the second one, then?" demanded the protagonist for a competition among the owners of front gardens. Mr. Perse declined to accept responsibility for describing what had happened to the abortive and disgraceful Second Crusade.

"Bearing in mind what the chairman has told us," he said, "I think we could then jump to the reign of Edward III, and have Queen Philippa, on her knees, begging him to

spare the lives of the six burghers of Calais. As this event took place in Calais, there may be objections to including it."

"Ropes round their necks and them in their shirts?" said the Councillor who had been snubbed about the schoolchildren's sports. "Nearly as draughty as Councillor Topson's Ancient Britons!" He chuckled hoarsely and broke into a wheezy coughing.

"Everybody knows about 'em, though, and as for feeling chilly, they can wear their long pants—or even their trousers—under their shirts," said the chairman austerely. "Long as we put plenty of straw on the floor of the lorry, and top up the sides a bit, it'll never be noticed."

"They can't kneel *a//* the time," said the woman Councillor, "nor can Queen Thingummy. You couldn't expect it. Kneeling can be terribly tiring, especially for a woman, if the trunk has to be kept upright all the time."

"They can cut their cloth according to the size of the crowds," said the chairman, obscurely but comprehensibly. "They only got to use a bit of gump."

"Then," said Perse, "we could go on to Henry VIII, I should think. He was buried at Windsor, you know."

"You got something there," said the chairman. "Henry VIII and all his six wives, Anne Boleyn with her head tucked underneath her arm—raise a rare laugh, that would!"

Young Mr. Perse looked shocked.

"I'd only thought of the funeral cortège, followed by a posse of Gentlemen-at-Arms. Rather more dignified, surely?" he asked coldly.

"No good at all, boy!" said the chairman, blithely. "After all, being made a borough is an occasion of rejoicing, and rejoicing, to my mind, includes a bit of a giggle. Old Harry the Lad, with a couple of cushions shoved up his doublet, and Anne Boleyn like what I said, that's the stuff to give the troops, you take my word for it."

"We ought to include Queen Elizabeth I, with a retinue, and then the pony club might like to take part as the Roundheads and Cavaliers," said the woman Councillor, who wanted the part of the Virgin Queen for herself, and whose daughter was one of the pony club's leading lights. "And that's another thing," she added. "Colonel Batty-Faudrey, up at the Hall, will expect something special for him and his wife and nephew."

"What about Joan of Arc?" demanded the Councillor who had suggested the church parade.

"Joan of Arc wasn't English," objected the Councillor for the Old Folks' Tea.

"Mrs. Batty-Faudrey has the costume, though, and she's also got her own horse," said the woman Councillor. "And the Colonel could be Charles II. He was pictured in the local paper as that, the year before last, when they had that show for charity up at the Hall."

"There's an idea there, Councillor Mrs. Skifforth," said the chairman, approbation in his voice. "I been wondering, ever since these here festivities were mooted, how we were going to include-in the Colonel, him being, as you might say, our most prominent citizen until we get the Mayor. Handle him right, and I wouldn't be surprised if he didn't invite the pageant to end up in the grounds of the Hall and provide a bite to eat and some refreshment. So now, all them in favour of the Colonel being invited to take on Charles II and his good lady Joan of Arc, will signify in the usual manner. Thank you! Carried *nearly* unanimous." He looked reproachfully at Mr. Perse, who had not raised his hand. "Now that's settled, what about a part for young Mr. Faudrey, the Colonel's nephew?"

"Dick Turpin, I should think," said Perse viciously. "The man's a mountebank."

"We could end up with Queen Victoria and Prince Albert," said Mrs. Skifforth, eagerly. "Everybody will

recognise *them*. I wonder whether we can get the loan of an open carriage?"

"The vicar's lady could do Queen Victoria. Spit and image," said the chairman. "And a barouche or a landau, or something of that, shouldn't be beyond us. I'll put Councillor Field on to it. He takes a great interest in things of that sort and is sure to be able to wangle something for us. Well, but, if the vicar's lady can be persuaded, we've still got to find somebody for Prince Albert. Anybody any ideas?"

"What have we got a drama club for?" demanded young Mr. Perse. "Surely one of their elegant gents can glue on some long hair and a bit of face-fungus?"

The chairman's face cleared.

"Well, that seems to take care of *that*," he observed. "That's got the important folk settled. Now what about other parts? We ought to go back to the full Council with some concrete ideas, I reckon."

"We've settled the pony club," the woman Councillor pointed out, "and I'm sure they'll be more than willing to take part."

"We ain't giving the other kiddies much of a look-in, so far as I see it," said the Councillor who had proposed the children's sports.

"There's the races for 'em," said the chairman, "and I daresay it might run to a presentation mug and some lemonade and a bun."

"Merrie England," said the Front-Gardens Councillor. "Stick the little 'uns in the first float, behind the band and that. The teachers 'ull have to see they're all toggged up right, and keep 'em in order, and stop 'em falling off the lorry. Part of their job."

"Strewth!" muttered Mr. Perse, who taught in the local Grammar School, and genuinely pitied his colleagues in the Primary and County Secondary schools.

"Then," pursued the Front-Gardens Councillor, "I reckon as how the bigger boys could do the Romans for us. Again,

their history master could vet the dressing-up so we'd know it was all authentic."

"And the bigger girls, or one of the pop groups who are intelligent enough to have long hair, could represent the Saxons, I suppose?" said Mr. Perse, ironically.

"The bigger girls? Why, yes," said the chairman, to Mr. Perse's astonishment. "That's a very useful suggestion, Councillor. Save the hire of wigs, and, as to physiquew, well, the girls is as good as the boys these days, I reckon. Well, that takes care of that, then. Now, any other ideas?"

"The Crusaders could be done by Toc H, couldn't they?" suggested the Councillor who had recommended the civic dinner.

"On that, we might be able to get a military band as well as the town band, provided they was able to play the same toon," said the Councillor for the Children.

"That's right. It would add a bit of uplift, and I reckon they wouldn't hear each other if we put one in the lead of the procession and the other to bring up the rear," said the Councillor for Open-air Dancing, "especially when you think of the row the spectators are bound to kick up. It would never notice if one was playing *Annie Laurie* and the other one *Two Lovely Black Eyes*, so far as I can see."

"We could do with a pop-singer group, like Councillor Perse said."

"The Scouts and Guides will have to come into it."

"What about the Red Cross and St. John Ambulance?"

"There's the Fire-fighting Services and the Civil Defence."

"Where do we put the Mayor and Mayoress? They'll have to be part of the procession."

"If we have the Scouts and the Guides, we ought to have the Church Lads' Brigade and the Girls' Life Brigade, else there won't half be a shine."

"There's the Salvation Army. They've got a decent sort of band. We could stick them somewhere in the middle of

the procession. They can always be relied on for a bit of liveliness."

They'd sing, and that might steal the show."

"What about amusements?"

"Amusements?" said the chairman, plunging in.

"Yes, *you* know. In the park. Roundabouts and swings and a coconut shy and hoop-la, and that. Put up a marquee and have a bingo session."

"Put two gondolas on the lake and let 'em breed," quoted Councillor Perse sardonically. "I'll tell you what," he said aloud. "If we're really going ahead with this thing, we shall need a pageant-master, otherwise everything will be chaos."

"And who do you propose?" demanded the chairman. "And how much lolly will they want? We got to think of the rate-payers, you know."

"I suggest we ask Mrs. Kitty Trevelyan-Twigg. She'll probably do it for next to nothing—possibly for nothing at all—if we give her a bit of publicity."

"Mrs. Kitty Trevelyan-Twigg? But she writes in *Vogue*!" exclaimed Councillor Mrs. Skifforth. "How on earth could we get *her*?"

"She happens to be my aunt," said young Mr. Perse modestly.

CHAPTER TWO

So Does an Inner Circle

“Horne Tooke was of an eccentric turn of mind.”

The friendly silence of the breakfast table was broken suddenly by Laura.

“Old Kitty has bought it,” she observed, with a chuckle. “Some nephew or other has been and gone and let her in for becoming responsible for overseeing an historical pageant at some place I’ve never heard of, but which has just been made into a borough. Either the local council or the nephew must be mad. Historical pageant my foot! Why, I remember, at college, old Kitty thinking Robert the Bruce was a professional boxer. Said she thought they must have said Robert the Bruise. Anyway, she wants me to go along and support her. The revels take place next week.”

She handed to her employer the letter she had just finished reading. Dame Beatrice put aside her own correspondence and bent an appreciative eye on Kitty’s masterpiece, which she proceeded to read aloud.

“Dear Dog,” ran the letter, “this is the time for all good men to come to the aid of the party. Now that the spring fashions are over—and heaven send we can all please ourselves and don’t have to wear them unless we really want to, in which case you can include me out—and no more debs and their hair-dos—my life is but the dust beneath the chariot wheels until the autumn. So a silly young nephew of mine has let me in for vetting and

generally overseeing a sort of historical pageant and jamboree at a place he lives in called Brayne, although certain in my own mind that neither he nor it has one, or they wouldn't have chosen me to be the pageant-master."

"She dishes up today's Higher Thought there," observed Laura.

"Anyway," continued Dame Beatrice, "we kick off on May seventh in honour of the town being made into a borough—although why I don't know, it being quite a dim sort of rather small, depressing, riverside place really—and also the Feast of St. Lawrence, who seems to have been a local clergyman at some time or other—anyway, the parish church is named after him."

"Good heavens!" exclaimed Laura. "You'd never think old Kitty had been baptised and confirmed in the Church of England!"

"By their works ye shall know them," said Dame Beatrice, "and our dear Mrs. Trevelyan-Twigg's works are invariably selfless and inspired."

"Inspired is about right," agreed Laura, grinning. "Remember at college when she burgled somebody's hat-box? Well, I don't know how you feel about it, but I'm inclined to go along and see this great sight—*viz.*, why the bush, meaning Kitty, is not burned. Old Kitty will get away with it all right; heaven alone knows how, but she will. If ever there was one of God's creatures who knew how to land on her feet..."

"Where is this town, now, apparently, elevated to the status of borough?" asked Dame Beatrice.

"I haven't the foggiest, as I say, but I'll look it up as soon as we've finished breakfast."

She did this, and was able to announce that Brayne was on the Thames, not many miles from London, and on the right bank as you looked upstream; that it had a population of twenty thousand two hundred and one; had been a market town since the early Middle Ages and had since

branched out to include a gasworks, a waterworks, a by-pass road and a good many factories.

"It certainly does not sound the most attractive place in the world," commented Dame Beatrice, "but go and support Mrs. Trevelyan-Twigg, by all means. I shall remove myself for a week to Carey's pig-farm, so you had better take a week's vacation, too."

"Many thanks. I'll let old Kitty know that I'm at her disposal, then, and see whether I can cadge a week's board and lodging at her expense at her London flat. I see she writes from there, so presumably she isn't tied to this Brayne place morning, noon, and night."

Kitty, as Laura had anticipated, made her more than welcome and showed her over the seven-roomed flat, a recent extravagance as the family also had a house in Sussex. Laura admired the new domicile.

"Pretty plushy," she pronounced. "Now what's all this about the borough jamboree and the Feast of St. Lawrence? Incidentally, just to keep the record straight, St. Lawrence was not a previous incumbent of the parish of Brayne, but a deacon of the early Church who became a martyr. He lived in Rome or Carthage, I believe, in the time of the Emperor Valerian—viz., to wit, somewhere half-way into the third century, if my memory serves me. He died a revolting death on a gridiron."

"Good heavens, Dog!" cried the astounded Kitty. "How on earth do you know all that?"

Laura waved a shapely hand.

"Not to deceive you," she replied, "Mrs. Croc. did a learned paper (for some psychiatry mob who publish such things) on the psychology of martyrs, both Christian and otherwise. I was given the stuff to type. That's all there is to it."

"Oh," said Kitty, obviously relieved. "So that's it. I thought at first you were beginning to get softening of the brain. Well, sit down and we'll have a drink while I slip you

the dope about the pageant. Lunch is in half an hour, if that's all right."

"Good! I'm starving!"

"Well, against the sub-committee's supposedly better judgment," Kitty went on, "I've decided to cram the whole thing into one single day. They wanted, if you please, *six* days of junketing, beginning with two days of market and fair. At such times, it seems, all the local jobs went around clobbering people over the head and getting girls into trouble. In fact, so far as I can make out, murder was about the most respectable crime committed. Well, I wasn't having anything to do with any of *that*. 'I wish no part in your sinned against and sinning,' I said. 'Besides, I can't spare the time.' You don't blame me, Dog, do you?"

"Assuredly not. 'One crowded hour of glorious life' is my motto, and always has been."

"I knew you'd agree. So, between us, the special sub-committee and I have boiled it down to this: nine-thirty ack emma sharp, procession of floats moves off from the Butts *en route* for Squire's Acre."

"The Butts? Squire's Acre?"

"That's all right. After lunch I'll take you along and show you. Pageant disperses at eleven, when pubs open. Can't bear to keep them after that—the men, I mean. They wouldn't stay, anyhow. Half-past twelve, official lunch at *The Hat With Feather*, two o'clock onwards a funfair in the local park, also other festivities in the Hall grounds."

"Festivities?"

"So-called, Dog. Have another drink. Cigarette? It's to be the usual sort of thing, and nothing on earth to do with me, thank goodness, although I shall have to show up. The primary schools will do maypole dances..."

"In the plural?"

"Of course. Five primary schools means five maypoles. I thought you were trained to teach?"

"Oh, yes, I see. No mixing of the breeds, as combined rehearsals too difficult to arrange."

"Yes. Well, then, the Grammar School and the County Secondary Boys' School are giving a trampoline display and will be doing stunts on the portable apparatus—buck, box, and horse—and the girls are putting on Modern Dance and Free Activities."

"All the usual sort of stuff, as you say."

"You can't beat it, Dog, if you want to bring along the parents. Then the pony club are holding a short gymkhana, to be followed by a display of dressage by Joan of Arc, Charles II, and Dick Turpin."

"Dressage? Who are the experts?"

"The people who are lending us the grounds of Squire's Acre. We've got to butter them up because of that, so, as they suggested this dressage thing, I had to agree, although personally I find all this well-schooled horse business rather boring, and probably the result of cruelty to animals anyway."

"What else goes on?"

"In the evening we really go to town. There's to be an all-ticket show in the Town Hall. We're hiring the Tossington Tots—repulsive little so-and-sos!—and a couple of fairly low-life comedians whose stuff, I don't mind wagering, will have to be vetted before it's fit for human consumption. Then there's a formation dance team who won't need pay (because they're amateurs) but who'll have to be lushed up, needless to say, and then we're to have a ballet from people nobody's ever heard of, and we finish off with the combined choirs of the Grammar School and the County Secondaries, all of whom will have to be browsed and sluiced, to borrow from your favourite author, and a contribution made to their School Funds."

"*Quite* a jamboree, take it for all in all."

"Yes. Oh, and the drama club are giving us a scene or two from *The Merry Wives of Windsor*."

"And what are the drama club like?" Laura enquired, interested.

"Awful! I could act the lot of them off the stage," said Kitty modestly. Lunch was served and they were joined by Kitty's husband.

"Hullo, Laura darling," he said. "Glad you could come along. I suppose Kitty has told you all about this pageant she's mixed herself up in?"

"I think I've grasped the main points," said Laura.

"I'm very pleased to think that she will have your support. You may be instrumental in persuading the spectators not to lynch her when the show's over. By the way, love," he added, turning to his wife, "if you've a rehearsal this evening, I'm taking Laura out to dinner."

"I've nothing but a few telephone calls to make, so you can add me to the party," said Kitty.

"Good thing I booked a table for four, then."

"Four? Who else is coming?"

"Young Julian Perse, our nevvvy, of course."

Kitty shuddered.

"He's the one who let me in for this pageant thing," she confided to Laura. "I've cut him out of my will. Anyway, I've had my revenge. He wanted to be Henry VIII with all six wives, but I made the sub-committee put him in a car, like the Mayor and Mayoress and all the other Councillors."

"But how cruel!" said Laura, with a leer which would have done credit to her formidable employer.

"Well, he *is* a Councillor," retorted Kitty, "so he can go by car like the other Councillors. What's the matter with that? So, in revenge, he's not going to show up at the Town Hall in the evening—though I don't really think it's revenge."

"He may think himself lucky in the end," said Laura, not knowing with what authority she spoke.

Dinner was gay and amusing and, allowing (as Laura tactfully did) for a certain amount of youthful arrogance and cocksureness on his part, young Mr. Perse acquitted himself

with distinction and proved to be a pleasant addition to the party. He took to Laura immediately, made himself extremely charming to her in a discreetly flirtatious manner, gently teased his aunt, talked seriously and well to his uncle, and when dinner was over offered to run Laura round Brayne in his car, so that she could see what she was letting herself in for. This offer was flatly turned down by Kitty, who objected to the project on the grounds that she wanted Laura all in one piece for the next day's rehearsals.

"Of course, lots of people won't be able to turn up for the afternoon stint because they'll be at work," she explained to Laura, when, young Mr. Perse having been sent back to Brayne, the others had returned from the restaurant to the flat, "but so long as two or three in each party know the drill, it ought to be all right, I should think. Anyway, the schools have all promised that we can have the children, so that's quite something, isn't it?"

The schools were as good as their word. At two o'clock in the afternoon the youngest members of the pageant were brought in motor coaches to Colonel Batty-Faudrey's grounds, but as it was a troublesome and expensive business to transport five maypoles with their attendant ribbons (added to the fact that the Colonel was not anxious to have his beautiful lawn torn up more than once), the children were merely given their places and were told to "dance round teacher," which they solemnly proceeded to do.

The Colonel and his wife came out to oversee the revels and keep an eye on the turf. All went well, however. Each small child was in plimsolls, so were the older boys. The older girls went one better and performed their dances and their exercises barefoot. Kitty introduced Laura to the Batty-Faudrey couple, and the four stood watching from a paved enclosure just outside the garden door of the house. Giles Faudrey, Mr. Perse's *bête noire*, did not watch the rehearsal.

"Well, *that* went off all right," said Kitty, after she had thanked the teachers—a gesture which appeared to surprise them—and had seen the motor coaches drive off. "Now for Toc H. Three of them promised to turn up. One's got an early-closing day, another's a road-sweeper and said he could 'look in as part of the job,' and the third one runs a bingo hall and it's his free afternoon. So that's all right, so long as there's no trouble about the armour."

"The armour?"

"Oh, Dog, you know how men fuss when you want them to dress up!"

"Oh, ah, yes. They're to be Crusaders, I think you said. What about the Mounties?"

"The Colonel has stuck his feet in about the pony club. They've got to perform in his paddock. It's an awful bore, because you know how an audience stampedes if it has to move from one place to another. Still, he's willing to do the dressage show in the paddock, too, so it will only mean one upset, thank goodness."

The three Crusaders arrived separately and at intervals. None of them had tried on the armour. Kitty showed them where their float would finish up and seemed relieved when they took themselves off. Nobody else turned up at all.

"Oh, well," said Kitty philosophically, "I shall just have to tell them on the day, that's all. It doesn't really matter. The pony club can't do any harm in the paddock, the dressage people can do their own rehearsing, and the rest, being more or less disciplined and under control, must just go where they're told. We've ordered half-a-dozen policemen to keep the lorries off the lawn, so there shouldn't be any difficulty there. It's this evening I'm really looking forward to, when we rehearse at the Town Hall. Under cover and with chairs to sit on, thank goodness!"

"Oh, *The Merry Wives*. Yes, of course."

"*In costume, with lighting and prompter, if all goes as arranged, but you know what some of these amateur*

companies can be like. I'd had other plans for this one, as a matter of fact. I wanted them to do the death-bed of Edward III."

"Whatever for?"

"I was going to pinch for myself the fat part of Alice Perrers."

"Alice Perrers? Never heard of her."

"Oh, Dog! And you took Advanced History at college!"

"It didn't include anybody called Alice Perrers. What did she do?"

"She was the king's mistress and she winkled the rings off his fingers as he lay dying. Anyway, the company kicked up rough, so I had to abandon the idea. That's the worst of amateurs. You've no hold over them, you see. Then I tried Shelley. He went to some sort of prep. school in the neighbourhood of Brayne before he was pushed off to Eton. I'd chosen the most *beautiful* little boy for Shelley—all golden hair and far-away grey eyes..."

"Blimey! I bet he was a thug!"

"Well, actually, I had to sack him because he did bite one of the other kids whose father happens to be on the Council, and, of course, I must admit he had one of those hoarse, foggy, dock-side voices, with only one vowel-sound, like they all have in Brayne, but he would have looked a dream all toggled up in a Fauntleroy suit."

"Did Shelley wear a Fauntleroy suit?"

"Oh, Dog, how on earth should I know? Anyway, it would have made this kid look like a late Victorian angel, and I was dead set on the idea. I'd even written the script for him, and also for Edward III."

"Hard cheese, to use an outmoded expression. So we're left with *The Merry Wives*. How much are they giving us?"

"A lot less than they wanted to. 'By the time we've had the Tossington Tots, the two crosstalk merchants, the formation team, the ballet and the combined choirs,' I said to them, 'you'll get about twenty minutes, take it or leave

it.' There was a lot of argument, of course, but I stuck to my guns, so now they're giving us Falstaff in the laundry basket, and then him as the fat woman of Brentford, and that sort of low gag, and that's about all. They don't love me much. Besides, I've had to bowdlerise some of the script."

"You've *what?*"

"Well, Shakespeare can be terribly coarse when he likes, Dog. Not at all a man to be trusted when there are teenagers in the audience."

"I shouldn't think kids would understand Elizabethan bawdy, and, anyway, I don't remember much of it in *The Merry Wives*."

"As the mother of children of school age," said Kitty primly, "I am not taking chances."

"Are your offspring going to be present at the pageant, then?"

"No, thank goodness! I haven't even told them we're doing it. I shall send each of them a souvenir programme and a hamper of tuck, but only when everything is safely over."

CHAPTER THREE

Town Hall Rehearsal

“...it would seem that there are good reasons for believing that Brentford was the scene of human activity at a very early period of civilisation.”

The Town Hall rehearsal, which took place at half-past seven that same evening, had both a comic and a sinister aspect. The Tossington Tots' manageress had demanded what the special sub-committee agreed was an unnecessarily high fee for allowing her charges to attend the rehearsal, and there had been an acrimonious correspondence and some frenzied telephone calls before the chairman had given in to what he regarded (and said so, in very plain terms) as extortion. The Tots themselves seemed happy enough but their manageress was haughty and tight-lipped to begin with, and then proceeded to find fault with the dressing-room and to comment acidly upon the primitive nature of the pulley which operated the curtain.

Even Kitty's sunny goodtemper was sorely tried and, when the Tots had left the Town Hall, and Laura remarked with candour, that she “would have dotted that woman one,” Kitty was compelled to admit that to have done so would have relieved her feelings to quite an appreciable extent.

The crosstalk comedians did not turn up. They had promised to send a script to be submitted to, and vetted by, the special sub-committee, but this had not been received.

The woman member was in agreement with Kitty, who said she was sure that some of the jokes would have to be toned down or, preferably, left out altogether, but, as the chairman pointed out, this was not the B.B.C. Home Service; it was only what people would be used to. Brayne, he insisted, was not a mealy-mouthed town, and people liked a bit of a laugh, the rest of the programme being, he thought, suitable only for the egg-heads.

The formation dance team turned up in what Kitty particularised as dlibs and drabs, but finally all arrived. They condemned the stage as being much too small, divided their numbers into two sets of eight, re-arranged their routine and took up so much of the time that the chairman looked several times at his watch and muttered that the hall was only booked until ten o'clock and that the caretaker would want to lock up and go home to his supper. The ballet, who had become very restive, cried off. They knew the stage and the hall, they said, and could not put up with any more hanging about. Kitty apologised charmingly for the delay and thanked them for coming. Their ballet-mistress, who had been screaming at them in Italian in the dressing-room, at this looked extremely disdainful, and withdrew her troupe in haughty silence. Kitty made an unseemly grimace behind the massive, Moominlike back.

"What with the Tossington Tots and the frightful woman in charge of them, and that ghastly formation team hogging more than half the rehearsal time, and now this snooty lot, the only thing I'm thankful for is that we haven't had the combined school choirs hanging about all the evening. Goodness knows what *they'd* have been up to by now," she said. "Oh, well, there's nothing to come but *The Merry Wives*. I suppose they're still in their dressing-room. I'd better go and rout them out and tell them to get cracking. Twenty minutes dead, and not a second more, can they have."

She went backstage and returned with a typescript, which she turned over discontentedly.

"What's this?" asked Laura.

"They say they may need a prompter, and don't possess one."

"Oh, Lord! That bodes no good. Can't they prompt each other? I thought amateurs usually did."

"I don't know! Here, Dog, be an angel and do the prompting for me. You've a much quicker eye for words than I have. Anyway, there looks a lot more than twenty minutes here. If there is, they'll have to cut it."

Laura took the script. It was dog-eared and not too clean, and appeared to be the property of Falstaff, since his were the only stage directions pencilled in. There was a delay while the company put up the simple scenery which was to decorate their stage, and the hiatus lasted long enough for Kitty to go backstage again and exhort them to be as quick as possible. The stage-manager, who was also taking one of the parts, snarled at her, and Falstaff's small page Robin chose this moment to catch his foot in a piece of scenery and bring it down.

Kitty bit back an unladylike expression which she had picked up in her workrooms, but the stage-manager was less self-restrained, and cursed the child roundly. However, all was in position at last, and Kitty made a mental note of the arrangements and suggested that on the morrow she should get a couple of Council workmen to put up the scenery, so that the company might reserve all their energies for the actual play. This helpful notion received curt thanks, the curtain went up, and an excerpt from *The Merry Wives of Windsor* took the boards.

Laura, following the script and only looking up as often as it seemed safe to do so—the play was not one with which she was particularly familiar—could not help wondering why the drama club had chosen it. Mistress Ford and Mistress Page lacked any of the sparkle necessary to their parts,

Falstaff ranted unbecomingly and was the reverse of a figure of fun, the jealous Ford was merely a clod, and Laura formed the impression that Page, Evans, and Caius had been given parts for the simple reason that there was nobody else available. Little Robin, the page, was attractive to look at, but recited his lines without expression. Obviously he understood very little of what he or anyone else was saying. In one respect only did the company shine. They did not require any prompting, but gabbled away as though they knew they were pressed for time.

Kitty, accustomed, in her own workrooms and *salon*, to keeping her ear to the ground, soon realised that other matters, apart from shortage of time and talent, were in operation. There was an undercurrent of exasperation and disillusionment. Nobody was prepared to be prompted for fear of suffering loss of face and of promoting the ill-concealed joy of rivals, for rivalry was certainly in the air. There was no team spirit among the players. Their aim and object, it began to be apparent, was to outplay and discredit one another, so much so that a most uncomfortable and supercharged atmosphere prevailed.

Mistress Ford and Mistress Page did not merely lack sparkle. One was sullen; the other giggled nervously. Falstaff was ranting because he also was nervous—not only nervous about his acting, Kitty deduced, but full of darker fears. What he was afraid of she did not know. He seemed a harmless little man who was hardly likely to have offended anybody except inadvertently, but she thought that, in both the mental and physical sense, he was too much of a lightweight for the part in which he had been cast.

She wondered who had been responsible for the casting. No producer had been forthcoming and, in the absence of this central authority, there might have been bickering, back-biting, and general ill-feeling over the allotment of the parts. Page, Evans, and Caius, almost more than the others, gave the impression of being anxious to get

the scene over and done with as soon as possible, and Kitty came to the conclusion that the oafish Ford was even more disgruntled than the rest of the cast. She noticed that, although Page was wearing a sword as part of his costume, Ford was without one. She wondered whether the one sword had been a bone of contention and silently cursed the firm from which the club had hired the costumes. Players, she knew, were touchy concerning the props and accessories, especially where these were nonexistent.

"We could do without most of this," she muttered to Laura. "However much more is there of it?" She applauded loudly when the gentlemen followed Falstaff and the clothes-basket off the stage, only to find that, after a very short exchange of speeches between Mistress Ford and Mistress Page, the gentlemen came on again and remained until the end of the scene, after which they took a couple of curtain calls.

"Oh, well, I suppose they want to rehearse the curtains as much as themselves," said Kitty. She applauded vigorously until she discovered from Laura that there was more to come. There also was an ominous amount of thumping behind the curtain.

"I think they must be changing the scenery," Laura observed. "The next bit I've got here indicates a room in the Garter Inn."

"Oh, Lord! They *can't* do any more! There isn't time!" cried Kitty. She disappeared behind the scenes again, leaving the chairman to confide to Laura that the caretaker had been standing in the doorway for the past five minutes and *must* be allowed to lock up and go home.

After a short time, Kitty reappeared with the stage manager, who was still in costume, presented him before the chairman and said wearily,

"Would you mind speaking to Mr. Collis? He refuses to listen to *me* when I tell him they *must* go home."

"Look here, old man," said Topson awkwardly, "sorry and all that, but, honestly, you really must pack up now. We've only got the hall until ten, and it's well past that already."

"But we've only done half of it! It isn't *our* fault the other rehearsals hogged so much of the time! I demand to be allowed to do the rest of our item," said the stage-manager.

"Well, you'll have to do it in the dark, then, and behind locked doors until the caretaker lets you out tomorrow morning," said Councillor Topson. "I know it's bad luck on your mob, but it's just one of those things."

At this moment Mistress Page took the floor, and so did the caretaker, meaningly jingling his keys.

"Yes, yes, O.K., John," said Topson hastily. "The drama club are just about to pack up."

"Of course we are," said Mistress Page, fixing the stage-manager with a stony eye. "I've got to get young Tony home. It's ever so long past his bedtime. His mother will be having a fit."

Assailed thus on all sides, the stage-manager gave way.

"Oh, all right," he sullenly agreed. "If it wasn't for disappointing the public, I'd withdraw my lot from the bally show altogether."

"Well!" said Kitty, an hour or so later, when she and Laura had returned to the flat. "That's that, that was! Some of these people would drive you to drink!"

"An excellent idea," said her husband. "You two relax and I'll start pouring. On the whole, how did it go, though?"

"Ghastly," Kitty replied. "Wasn't it ghastly, Dog?"

"*Well*, I must admit that a few temperaments seem to have been thrown, but these last-ditch rehearsals are always dodgy."

"There'll be murder done among the members of the drama club if temperaments are thrown tomorrow," said Kitty. "I suppose they're all a bit on edge, but when I went

behind the scenes to hurry them up with their changing, what with the caretaker breathing out smoke and fire and all that, there was no reason for Mistress Page to claim that Mistress Ford spoilt her longest speech by butting in on it just before the end and robbing her of the words 'or bid farewell to your good life for ever.' Of course, the silly woman did butt in, Dog, if you noticed, but there was a lot of tension all the way through."

"I don't see why any anxiety. None of them fluffed."

"No, they were determined not to. I've experienced a lot of temperament-throwing in my various establishments, Dog, and I should say that that lot were all at each other's throats. Of course, you were glued to the script, but I was watching, and it seemed to me they were all in a state of angry nerves, and as for poor little Falstaff—what a choice for the part! Anyway, to smooth things over, I've agreed that there will be a ten-minute interval tomorrow night while their second scene is got ready, and I'm going to put them on before the ballet. That's per programme. Oh, and there were high words passing between Ford and Page, by the way. One of the property swords got lost, and both wanted to claim the one that was left. In the end, Page managed to snatch it, but both were plainly peeved."

"Good Lord!" said her husband. "How childish can one get?"

"Oh, I don't know," said Kitty. "Don't you remember how you created at the time of that fancy dress ball we went to, when the hirer people had forgotten to pack you a pair of Cavalier boots and you had to wear your riding ones?"

"That was different. The lack of those boots ruined the costume, as I jolly well pointed out to them when I sent the stuff back."

"Well, they knocked ten shillings off the bill."

"As though that made up for a spoilt evening!"

"Oh, go on with you! You know jolly well that, half-way through, you went to the cloakroom and changed into your

dancing pumps, which you'd treacherously taken with you without my knowing."

"Well, I wasn't the only one, so what?"

Laura laughed.

"Let's hope the missing sword turns up all right," she said. "And talking of weapons, what price that battleaxe who runs the Tossington Tots?"

"And the *very* Italian lady who bosses the ballet?" said Kitty, giggling.

"And that bad-tempered lot in the formation team! Still, I did have quite a lot of sympathy there. With eight of them doing half the routine and the other eight doing the rest of it, it won't be nearly as spectacular as they intended."

"I'm worried about those damned comedians," said Kitty. "Three times have I 'phoned them for that script and *still* it hasn't turned up. Why won't they send it, unless their jokes are blue round the edges?"

"I don't suppose they'll be too blue for the audience," said her husband.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Day of the Pageant

"We have now reached the period of one of the most important and exciting events recorded in the annals."

Laura awoke at just after dawn on the following day with what Mr. Wodehouse has called a sense of impending doom. A spiteful *swoosh* of rain against the window brought her out of bed. There was no mistake. The day of the pageant had begun by being thoroughly wet.

"Oh, Lord!" said Laura, aloud. "Poor old Kitty!" She went back to bed and half an hour later a maid came in with early tea.

"What a pity it's turned out wet, madam," she said.

"Mrs. Trevelyan-Twigg *will* be disappointed. I do feel sorry."

"Yes, so do I," said Laura. "Still, it may clear up before the pageant moves off." She went down to breakfast, fully prepared to offer consolation to a broken-hearted friend, but Kitty was incongruously cheerful.

"With any luck, Dog," she announced, "we can call the whole thing off until we put on the show at the Town Hall this evening, when everything will be under cover."

"Do you *want* to call it off, then?" asked Laura, astonished. "I mean, you must have put in an awful lot of work."

"Dog," said Kitty, earnestly, "ever since I took on this beastly pageant, I've had a *thing* about it. That's one reason

why I did want you to come along and support me. As I've told you before, the Trevelyan's are a very old Cornish family—Celtic, you know—and we *sense* things. Well, I've been sensing things for the past three weeks, and I jolly well know that everything that *can* go wrong *will* go wrong. Look at that rehearsal last night! It was a sheer *fiasco*."

"Good heavens, you don't want to worry about last-minute rehearsals! Why, they *always* go wrong. Look at what used to happen at college. But it was always all right on the night."

"Oh, that dreary old tripe! But, honestly, Dog, I've got a sort of crawling feeling in my bones."

"With me, the thumbs prick, like in *Macbeth*."

"You're not to laugh, Dog. I'm deadly serious. Well, as soon as we've finished breakfast, I'd better 'phone the schools and find out what they think about the weather. I don't know how to reach anybody else, so they'll have to take their chance. I shall go to the Brayne Butts, of course, where everybody is supposed to assemble, and test the general feeling of the meeting, but I bet very few turn up."

"That's where you're wrong," said her husband. "If I know anything about it, everybody will turn up. They're not going to miss their fun for a spot of rain. I'll telephone the schools. They gave you the numbers, didn't they? I know they're not in the book. Now, then, take it easy for a bit. There's plenty of time, thanks to the God-forsaken hour at which you insisted we should breakfast."

He reported back some time later with the information that, as the schools had all been granted a day's holiday, the children would certainly turn up to take their places in the procession, and that the afternoon's demonstrations and dances would certainly be possible if the weather became no worse.

"Oh, well," said Kitty, resignedly, "I suppose that's that, then. These awful, healthy, Welfare State brats! Nobody

ever thinks they might catch pneumonia, or fall off the lorry, or something!”

“But you wouldn’t want them to, would you?” enquired Laura.

“Good heavens, Dog! Of course I wouldn’t!” cried Kitty, deeply shocked. “Poor little things! Whatever next!”

“I only wondered,” said Laura. As she made this observation, the telephone rang, and Twigg—Kitty had not been able to persuade him to add her patronymic to his own—went into the adjoining room to answer it. In a short time he came back, grinning.

“That was Colonel Batty-Faudrey,” he said. “The boys’ schools seem to have borrowed groundsheets from the Brayne Scout Troop to put under the trampoline for this afternoon, but have rung up the Colonel to ask permission to make sanded runways up to the portable apparatus, as the rain will have made the turf slippery. He’s told them they are to do nothing of the kind, adding that his lawns are not the blasted Sahara Desert. He wanted an under-taking from you that his orders will be obeyed. I told him that this afternoon’s displays were not your concern, and advised him to contact the two headmasters and hammer home his point.”

“Of course the schools won’t put sand down if he says they mustn’t,” said Laura. “I say, I don’t want to spoil your day, Kitty, love, but I really believe it’s stopped raining, so, doubtless, the show will go on as planned.”

They arrived in good time at the Butts, an extremely wide thoroughfare bordered by Georgian, Regency, and Victorian houses. The floats and lorries were not only drawn up in it, but some were already manned by troops of wildly milling schoolchildren whose teachers stood about in the roadway trying to look as though they were not associated with what was going on.

Toc H had also turned up and were coyly wearing overcoats or rainproofs over their Crusader surcoats. They had

stacked their swords and helmets out of sight on their lorry and were standing about in groups, obviously bashful at the thought of making a public appearance in fancy dress.

Suddenly there was the sound, as it were, of trumpets, and the town band came into view. There was wild cheering from the youngsters, which was renewed every time another group arrived and another lorry was loaded up. Kitty waited until the tally appeared to be complete, and then came the business of ensuring that each float was in its rightful place in the line. Kitty had been furnished by her nephew with a boldly printed list showing the chronological order of the historical events which were being demonstrated—a list of which both Twigg and Laura had copies, in case the pageant-master lost or mislaid her own.

The lorries were placarded, but the drivers seemed to think that so long as the right group got on to the right lorry, manoeuvring merely to get the chronological order correct was a work of supererogation and a waste of time, temper, and petrol. However, at Kitty's insistence, they gave in, but, just as everything appeared to be in order, Kitty remembered the pony club and, amid a certain amount of blasphemy, all the lorries behind that of Elizabeth I had to go into reverse to leave sufficient space for the riders.

At last the Mayoral car arrived, followed by the cars of the Councillors. Then came the Civil Defence contingent, with tin hats, gas masks, stirrup-pumps, and other war-time equipment salvaged from some obscure and insanitary dump in the cellars of the Town Hall. Other floats contained Girl Guides, Boy Scouts, Rovers, Wolf Cubs, Brownies, Rangers, Girls' Life Brigade, Church Lads, St. John Ambulance (with water-bottles and stretchers), and Red Cross (with a Meals on Wheels van). In all their glory, the Fire-Fighting Services (using all three of the fire-engines allotted to the new borough) brought up the rear. There was no military band.

Kitty, her husband, and Laura went along and re-checked the various items, the teachers unwillingly climbed on to lorries and settled themselves among their charges, the Boy Scouts set up a bugle concert in opposition to the town band (which immediately abandoned the contest), and Kitty was about to order the procession to move off as she, her husband, and Laura prepared to enter Twigg's car, which was to follow the procession, when Laura suddenly said,

"I say, didn't you mention something about Queen Victoria and Prince Albert?"

"Oh, they've scratched. It's all right," said Kitty. "The vicar's wife didn't want to do it, so we've turned Prince Albert into one of the burghers of Calais. He's a bit peeved about it, actually. Hullo!—oh, no, it seems to be all right. Henry VIII, Wolsey, and the six wives are in position, thank goodness, and so are Elizabeth I and her courtiers. There's been a bit of a hoo-ha about that—here, I'd better let the thing start, I suppose. Not much of an audience so far, is there?" She regarded the little knot of onlookers with aversion. "You'd think the townspeople would take a bit more interest."

She blew three shrill blasts on a police whistle—a proceeding for which her husband had insisted she ask permission of the Brayne inspector—and then, as the band, this time ignoring the Scouts, burst once again into blossom, the procession began to move off.

"Go on," said Laura to Kitty, when they were settled in their car. "Tell me more."

"Go on with what?"

"The brouhaha about Elizabeth I."

"Oh, that! Yes, well, you see, the drama club wanted to do Elizabeth I and her courtiers, and they wanted the art club to do Edward III and the burghers. Well, the art club said they were jolly well dashed if they were going to be fobbed off with just being in their shirts and all that, considering that the drama club had got Henry VIII and

Wolsey and all six wives, and also this show of theirs in the Town Hall this evening. Well, I couldn't help seeing the art club point of view, so I said to the drama club, 'You can't hog *all* the fat, you know. Must give somebody else a look in some of the time. Either do Edward III and like it, or I can easily give it to another gang'—although who, Dog, I really couldn't think!—'and you won't get Elizabeth I, anyway,' I said. You don't blame me, Dog, do you? I mean, there are times when you've got to be tough, or go to the wall, like they do at Eton."

"For Pyramus and Thisbe, says the story, did talk through the chink of a wall," Laura observed.

"Oh, dry up, Dog! You know perfectly well what I mean. Oh, thank goodness, we're moving at last! I began to think there was a hold-up. You know, Dog, I suppose mathematics or dynamics or economics, or something, could explain it, but I've never been able to understand why a line of vehicles, given a yard or so between them, can't make a synchronised start. I mean, why can't A and B and C and D, and so on, all get going at the same time? If everybody compared watches so they could all let in the clutch at the same instant, I can't see—Oh, Lord! *Now* where do the band think they're leading us? *This* isn't on our route at all!"

"I expect they've promised their girl-friends, standing at the front windows or, possibly, at the garden gate, an uninterrupted view of the pageant. I shouldn't worry. We shall get there in the morning just the same," said Laura consolingly. Kitty sank back.

"Well," she said, "there's nothing for me to stampede about, after all, until that Town Hall do this evening."

Such proved to be the case. The procession, although wrongly routed by the town band, contrived to get to Squire's Acre at only a little after the appointed time. It was then addressed by the Mayor and was dismissed in good order and at an hour when the pubs were opening their hospitable doors. The schoolchildren were warned not to be

late for the afternoon's displays, and the rest of the morning passed off without incident.

Colonel and Mrs. Batty-Faudrey had elected not to take part in the procession, but would don their costumes for the display of dressage they were to give in the afternoon. Their nephew, Mr. Giles Faudrey, did turn up at the Butts, however, and was with difficulty constrained to take his rightful place in the procession. He evinced a strong inclination to ride alongside the lorry which held Henry VIII, the six wives, and Cardinal Wolsey, and Kitty had to exercise a nice blend of persuasion and bullying to get him into line. The attraction, she deduced, was the girl who was taking the part of Catherine Howard.

Lunch at *The Hat With Feather* was unattended by Laura and Twigg, the former because she had not been invited, the latter because he conceived it his duty to look after her and entertain her, although this was not the reason he gave.

"Can't stand official lunches," he explained. "Kay's *got* to go, and young Julian is also bound to be there, so, between them, they can do all that's necessary. Let's go to Richmond. I know a pub where they give you a very respectable meal."

They got back to Squire's Acre at three, in time to witness an unrehearsed but popular item. An involuntary contributor to the display of dressage by Colonel Batty-Faudrey, his lady, and his nephew, was a small boy on a donkey, with the donkey literally making all the running. As an example of dignity and impudence, the spectacle had a quite delightful side, but the Colonel was not particularly pleased to have his group's activities, including the donkey, photographed by the local press and recorded by some privately-owned cameras as well, this amid cheering and laughter.

Where the donkey had come from, nobody seemed to know, but there could be no doubt of its popularity with the people of Brayne. Mrs. Batty-Faudrey was even more

incensed than her husband, and commanded her nephew to “get that ridiculous animal out of the way.” Giles Faudrey dismounted and attempted to haul the donkey out of the roped enclosure in which the gymkhana had been held, but the donkey, true to the tradition of its race, dug in its dainty forefeet and refused to budge. Giles gave up the contest and remounted, amid renewed cheering, and, led by Mrs. Batty-Faudrey, the dressage abruptly dismissed itself and cantered out of the ring.

“That kid on the donkey is the one who takes the part of Falstaff’s page in *The Merry Wives*,” Laura remarked to Kitty, as they separated to go their different ways for tea.

CHAPTER FIVE

Doings at Squire's Acre and the Town Hall

"...with all its tenements, meadows, pasture land, woods, rents, and service."

Colonel Batty-Faudrey (retired) was not a very happy man. To begin with, the house and estate had been purchased with his wife's money, and, to go on with, one of her stipulations had been that her nephew was to live with them. Colonel Batty (he had added his wife's name to that of his own at her instigation when they married) did not like his wife's nephew, and men, in his opinion, are better judges of other men than are women. In this, he was, no doubt, correct, for, in Kitty's terms, young Mr. Faudrey was a mess, and, in her nephew's idiom, a pullulating little wen.

However, on the afternoon of the pageant, young Mr. Faudrey did not betray these characteristics. He was, in fact, the life and soul of the party. He supervised the setting up of the maypoles, helped to get the schoolboys' portable apparatus into place, tested the trampoline by performing a most creditable couple of somersaults—"look, boys, no hands!"—on it, and finished up by putting his horse over some four-foot railings—all this, it seemed, to impress a young lady, one of the lesser lights of the drama club, but a nubile wench for all that, albeit she had not been given a part in *The Merry Wives*. The afternoon remained fine. There were moments of tension, it was true, as when some of the maypole dancers went wrong in reverse, but their teachers,

wading waist-deep into the holocaust, soon pushed and prodded the thing to rights, and the primary schools trotted off, amid applause, to be regaled with lemonade and buns in a large marquee which had been set up in the paddock. The bigger boys and girls performed adequately and were similarly rewarded, the town band gave of its best, the Boy Scouts put on an unexpected sing-song, and Colonel Batty-Faudrey went up to his room, when the display of dressage was over, with the purpose of changing out of his Charles II costume. While he was doing so, he happened to look out of the window. Hurriedly he donned white trousers, a black alpaca jacket, his regimental tie, and his cricketing boots, and hastened downstairs to his wife who, fancying herself more than a little in Joan of Arc's cardboard armour and long surcoat, had elected not to change until after tea.

She was seated on the open-air dais from which the notables—including the Mayor, the Mayoress, the Borough Councillors, and Kitty—had watched most of the proceedings, so, under cover of a spirited rendering by the Boy Scouts of *What Shall We Do With the Drunken Sailor*, the Colonel addressed his wife thus:

“What do you know about Giles?”

“Giles?” repeated Mrs. Batty-Faudrey. “What *should* I know about him? Does it matter, anyway?”

“He's just gone into the woods.”

“Well, no harm in that. He's probably feeling the heat. It absolutely poured down on the paddock. I gave that little idiot on the donkey a piece of my mind.”

“He has a girl with him.”

“Who has?”

“Giles.”

“Girl? What girl?”

“I don't know what girl, but she's wearing very tight trousers and an Ascot hat.”

“Well, you'd better go and disentangle them. It can't be anybody we've invited here. They wouldn't dress like that.”

“I thought perhaps...”

The Boy Scouts, having hit upon several things to do with the Drunken Sailor, relaxed, and the Batty-Faudrey conversation lapsed until his lady poked the Colonel sharply in the ribs and waved a hand towards the woods. Colonel Batty-Faudrey shook his head, got up, announced firmly to the occupants of the dais that tea was now to be served in the long gallery, and the Boy Scouts struck up *The Drummer and the Cook*. The dais moved off with a leisurely dignity which disguised its relief at the prospect of a cup of tea and (with any luck) sandwiches, sausage rolls, and small, rich cakes, and soon disappeared into the cool interior of the house.

“You miserable coward!” muttered Mrs. Batty-Faudrey to her husband. “Just wait and see what I’ll say to Giles when he comes back! We don’t want another—well—*incident*. But you—you poltroon!”

She was obliged to break off in order to usher her guests upstairs to where, in the long gallery, small tables had been established and maids were in attendance. Half-way through the orgies young Mr. Faudrey turned up with the trousered girl in tow, steered her to the vacant seats at the table where sat the Mayor and Mayoress and his uncle and aunt, and introduced her.

“This is Caroline Fisher, Mr. Mayor, Madam Mayoress, Aunt and Uncle. Catherine Howard in this morning’s procession, don’t you know.”

“How amusing!” said the Mayoress, nervously. “Your head tucked underneath your arm, and everything!” (To Mr. Perse’s fury, Councillor Topson had carried the day with regard to Anne Boleyn’s well-known eccentricity).

“That wasn’t me. That was Angela Pettit. She didn’t really want to do it,” said Miss Fisher. “I mean, a girl wants a head on her shoulders, not underneath her arm, when she makes a public appearance, doesn’t she?” She giggled, aware of a hostile atmosphere.

“Jolly sporting of her, anyway,” said Mr. Faudrey, pulling out a chair and pushing her on to the seat of it. “Don’t you think so, Aunt Elsie?” He met the hard challenge in his aunt’s steely eyes with an impudent smile. Mrs. Batty-Faudrey did not reply. She invited the Mayoress to accept another cup of tea.

Laura had neither expected nor desired a seat on the dais, and Twigg, who, as Kitty’s husband, had been invited to join the V.I.P. contingent, had again elected to escort Laura instead. When the non-V.I.P. section of the spectators streamed off to the paddock for tea, directed thereto by a loudspeaker, he and Laura slunk away to the local park and recreation ground, where they threw at coconuts, played hoop-la, rode on the roundabout, went up in a swing-boat, ate candy-floss and ice-cream and Twigg came away hugging a large, repellent vase, while Laura held two coconuts and a small jar of boiled sweets. They parked the vase among some convenient bushes, gave the coconuts to some small boys, ate the boiled sweets and put the empty jar into a litter bin and then went off in search of tea.

They prowled along Brayne high street, found a lorry-drivers’ café, went in and had ham and eggs, very strong tea, and some thick, new bread-and-butter.

“That feels better,” said Laura, when they emerged. “I thought the time was past when I would want ham and eggs at half-past five in the afternoon. Wonder how Kitty’s getting on?”

“Perhaps we’d better get back to Squire’s Acre and find out,” said Twigg. “I think I’ll get my car out of that parking space round by the stables before all the Councillors start revving up theirs. Then we can make a clean getaway as soon as Kitty is ready to go.”

Kitty was more than ready to go. They found her seated in the car reading the A.A. book.

“Well, *you’re* a nice couple, I must say,” she observed. “Where on earth have you been?”

"Studying local conditions," her husband replied.
"Terribly sorry, and all that, but we thought you'd find it a job to tear yourself away. We certainly didn't expect you yet. How did you manage it?"

"I made the excuse of having to get everything ready for the evening entertainment. I bet it'll need it, too," said Kitty.

"How did the afternoon go off, do you think?" asked Laura, as Twigg drove out by the lodge gates.

"Well, it's hard to say," Kitty replied.

"The unrehearsed effects, you mean?"

"Yes. Of course, the spectators enjoyed themselves, I suppose."

"Well, isn't that the be-all and end-all of a public do?"

"In a way, I suppose it is. All the same, I have a feeling that it's the last time Colonel Batty-Faudrey lends Squire's Acre for the benefit of the borough."

"The donkey sequence brought the house down, though."

"Yes, Dog, I know it did, but, although the Batty clan carried it off quite well, I can't feel that, with them, it was a popular item. I mean, it mucked up the dressage properly, didn't it?"

"Think it was done by accident or by design?"

"Good heavens, Dog! Nobody would have the nerve to bait the Batty-Faudreys! They're the uncrowned royalty of Brayne."

"We don't still live in the age of feudalism, you know."

"All the same, you don't (if you've got any sense) beard the lion in his den. Oh, no. That kid and his donkey—it was sheer accident, I'm sure. Talk about Sancho Panza!"

"Are you sure you feel all right?" asked Laura, solicitously. "I mean, you're not suffering from the heat or anything, are you?"

"No, of course not. Why?"

“Well, I mean—Sancho Panza? I didn’t realise you knew such a character existed!”

“Oh, you’re not the only one who knows the name of David Copperfield’s aunt’s lodger. The donkeys, if you remember, and the donkey boys, were always being chased off the green, or whatever it was, and—”

“Yes, dear, forget it. Do we get anything to eat before we leave your flat again for the Town Hall?”

“Well, it’s terribly early for dinner, so we’re only going to have snacks and drinks and then a cold collation when we get home tonight. Whatever happens, we’ve got to be at the Town Hall in good time. There are sure to be umpteen things to see to.”

They got to the Town Hall an hour before the Tossington Tots were due to open the proceedings. The Tots themselves had not arrived, but the formation team were there, busily rehearsing on a stage which had been newly swept by the caretaker. The combined school choirs had also turned up and were accommodated in the balcony, from which they could watch the proceedings. This arrangement had been insisted upon by Kitty, to the irritation of the special sub-committee, who claimed (rightly) that it would considerably reduce the number of tickets for sale.

“Sixty good seats up there,” the chairman had complained. “We could charge half-a-crown a time.”

“And I’m putting a hundred kids into those sixty seats,” Kitty had retorted. “If we permit a hundred assorted offspring to mill about behind the scenes until they’re wanted, we shall have murder on our hands. I’m sticking them where an eye can be kept on them, and where they can see and hear the rest of the performance. If *you* don’t know what kids are capable of when they’re left at a loose end for a couple of hours, well, I *do*. What are sixty half-crowns if, otherwise, the house is set on fire?” She had canvassed Laura’s opinion of the arrangements and had found her judgment completely upheld.

The drama club turned up at the same time as the Tossington Tots, and the two comedians arrived five minutes later, when Kitty had given them up for lost. They had looked upon the wine when it was red, and were so beerily bonhomous that Kitty confided to Laura that she was not at all certain whether it would be justifiable to allow them to take the stage.

"You'll have to," said Laura. "I wouldn't, personally, argue with lads in their condition. Why not stick them on first and so get rid of them?"

The comedians, when this suggestion was mooted, turned it down flat. The house, they explained, had to be warmed up for a crosstalk act. You couldn't go on "cold."

"Got to get the applause going," the slightly less inebriated of the two explained. Kitty gave in and went into the Tots' dressing-room to find out how matters were going there. One of the Tots had lost its top-hat and another had mislaid a shoe, but otherwise there was nothing untoward. The fact that the whole dressing-room was in a state of yelling chaos troubled Kitty not at all. She exchanged a blithe nod for a cold stare from the Tots' manageress, informed her in a bellow, loud enough to rise above the vociferations of the children, that the company was "on" in twenty minutes, and went off to round up the ballet and *The Merry Wives*.

The former were listening, with uneasy docility, to the screamed objurgations of their ballet mistress. The latter were ominously quiet. Their stage-manager enquired whether the Council workmen were prepared to put up the scenery and, upon being assured that they were in the auditorium and already briefed, produced detailed sketches of the set for the second scene and observed that of course it was a great pity he had had to abandon the rehearsal on the previous night, as the scenery for the second excerpt was heavy, elaborate, and might not fit the stage.

Kitty told him briefly that the council workmen would take care of everything, went in front to see how the audience was settling in, found some small change for an attendant who had been offered a pound note for a three-penny programme, stopped for a word with Laura, and then went backstage to warn the Tots' supervisor that the National Anthem would precede the show "as we're mostly doing musical items," and that its termination would be the signal for the children to be ready in the wings.

The Tots fought their way through a series of popular love-songs and other unsuitable routines, followed by impersonations, tap-dancing, and acrobatics. They went off, kissing their hands in acknowledgment of the good natured applause of most of the audience and the cat-calls, whistles, and unkindly laughter of youths in the back rows of the (so-named) stalls. They were followed by the inebriated comedians. These managed better than Kitty had thought they would. Their jokes were stale rather than blue and although, at one point, one of them fell down, the audience concluded that this was part of the act and received it well. Kitty went backstage to find out whether first-aid was required. There she paid off the comedians and was extremely thankful to see the back of them.

"And mind how you go," she warned them kindly. "There's a slip-way to the river and this side-door opens on to it, so walk *uphill*, whatever you do, and you'll reach the high street all right."

"And the pub," they said. "Cheerie-bye!"

The formation team, still not very happy about the division of their squad, gave place, after ten minutes or so, to *The Merry Wives*. Before the actors took the stage, Kitty appeared in front of the curtain to announce that there would be a ten-minute interval between the two scenes.

"After all," Laura had urged, "you've to get those hundred choristers down from the balcony and on to the stage, as well as giving time for that scenery to be changed.

I think you're wise. You don't want all that clatter in the middle of one of the acts, and the audience will only stampede if you keep them waiting while those hundred kids get into position."

"The drama club are pleased, thank goodness, and I expect the choirmaster will be, too. The ballet are not so happy, as it means an extra ten minutes' wait for them, but they're a mild lot and won't create, I hope, although I can't say the same about that awful old Jezebel who bosses them," said Kitty, when she returned to her seat beside Laura. "I daresay the Mayor thinks he ought to be asked to speak during the interval, but I'm not having any. He's spoken twice today, once when the procession reached Squire's Acre this morning and again when there was a lull in the jamboree this afternoon. He'll have to be content with that."

The Merry Wives played their first scene rather breathlessly, but displayed more liveliness than they had done on the previous night at the rehearsal.

"Let's hope the rows are a thing of the past," said Laura, as the curtain came down and the house lights went up. "I notice that Mr. Ford and Mr. Page are both wearing swords, so that disposes of that little disagreement. Falstaff got into the clothes-basket with unnecessary daintiness, I thought, but he seemed to have no difficulty in tucking himself away."

"Well, I thought they managed very well. Actually, he's rather exceptionally thin and light. They picked him because he'd be easy to carry out in the basket, so he told me. He made some sort of joke about being carried out feet first. I wish he hadn't. I'm terribly superstitious about that sort of thing," said Kitty.

The interval ended. The school choirs had descended to the ground floor. People were back in their seats. The house lights went out and there was a polite hush, broken occasionally by a boorish laugh from the back rows, as the

audience waited for the curtain to rise on Scene Two of *The Merry Wives*. Nothing of the sort happened. The back rows began a slow handclap. Kitty muttered under her breath and rose from her seat. She soon appeared on-stage again and said in loud, clear tones,

"Could we have the lights on, please? Ladies and gentlemen, I am sorry to say that one of the cast has been taken ill, so we shall be obliged to leave out the next scene. Les Hirondelles will now dance for us an original ballet entitled, *Spring in Squire's Acre...*"

"Jump in Squire's Pond!" suggested an uncultured voice.

"Thank you, ladies and gentlemen," said Kitty.

There was the amount of sympathetic applause usually offered by an audience on disappointing occasions at concerts and in the theatre, the lights were lowered again, and, in a creditably short time, the ballet company had taken the stage, which had been hastily cleared of scenery by the workmen. The next performance, as Laura said later, was earnest and painstaking rather than graceful and adept, but the audience received it kindly and the ballet danced off, at the end, looking extremely pleased with themselves.

As soon as they had closed the curtain, Laura began to wonder what had happened to Kitty, who had not returned to her seat. She slipped in beside Laura, however, just as the school choirs began a spirited rendering of *Jerusalem*. Laura waited until this was over, and then asked,

"Anything happened? Is it serious?"

"Well, I don't know. Nobody's ill. I just thought that was the simplest thing to say. The fact is, they've lost Falstaff," Kitty replied.

"Lost him. You don't mean...?"

"Oh, no, he isn't dead. At least, I do hope it's nothing like that! It's just that he was carted out in the basket of dirty laundry, and it appears that nobody's seen him since."

"Must have lost his memory, or remembered a date with his girl-friend," said Laura. "Or is he still stuck in the

pub? There's one just across the road."

"They've looked there, and, anyway, they say he wasn't the pub type. Well, I'll have to leave them to track him down. It's really no business of mine if they lose their actors, is it? Anyway, I'm not altogether sorry, so long as he's all right. We're just as well off without Scene Two."

CHAPTER SIX

The Reclamation of Falstaff

“On one occasion the fat knight was conveyed from Ford’s house concealed in a ‘buck-basket,’ covered over with dirty linen, and ultimately cast into the Thames.”

The first intimation which Kitty had that the missing Falstaff had been found came on the following morning in the form of a call from the Brayne police. It did not come by telephone, but in the person of a young, charming, and most disarming plain-clothes officer who asked whether he might come in. Kitty’s maid left him in the hall while she went to enquire.

“What have you been up to?” enquired Laura, when the maid had had instructions to show the officer into the drawing-room. “Parking offence, bouncing through the red lights, tossing rubbish into the reservoir, trying to blow up the gasworks?”

“Oh, dry up, Dog,” said Kitty. It will be something about that wretched little man.”

“What wretched little man?”

“Falstaff. I bet he’s got himself run over in Brayne high street or something. I had the stage-manager on the telephone this morning to say he hadn’t been traced. Well, now I suppose he has finished up in hospital.”

“Why should they worry *you* about it?”

“Oh, Dog, because they’ve worried everybody else first, I suppose, and got nowhere.”

This was not a bad guess, as matters turned out. The young detective-constable apologised for bothering Kitty—just a routine enquiry, of course—but the police were trying to find out who might have seen the dead man last...

“Dead man?” cried Kitty. “What dead man? I thought you’d come about Falstaff.”

“Indeed I have, madam. The gentleman who took the part in a pageant which, we understand, you organised, was a certain Mr. Luton. He was found dead in the Thames at the foot of Smith Hill this morning. He had been stabbed.”

“Really? Oh, dear! *I am* sorry. But when you speak of a pageant, well, *that* was held yesterday *morning*. This Falstaff business was the concern of the Brayne Dramatic Society. Apart from billing them when they offered to do their stuff, I had very little to do with them at all.”

“Yes, madam, I see. We understand, though, that you proposed to have an unscripted interval mid-way between the two scenes of the play in which Mr. Luton was the leading character.”

“Quite right. It wasn’t on the printed programme, but it seemed a good idea, so I announced it. You might say that it was more than a good idea. It was really necessary.”

“Could you explain that, madam?”

“Oh, yes. The scenery had to be changed, and we didn’t want a hold-up. Then the choirs had to be got down from the gallery and given time for all the usual things children seem to need to do on these occasions, and we wanted to let people sneak out for a lung-cancerous cigarette or a delirium tremens drink, and so forth. It was a bit of a last-minute decision, as you say, and, of course, we never got around to Scene Two because, by the time the interval was over, they’d lost Falstaff.”

“Yes, indeed, madam. Another routine question, if you don’t mind. Where were you during that interval?”

"I spent it in the auditorium. It wasn't until there was this hold-up by the drama club that I went backstage and was told that Falstaff was missing."

"I imagine that there were witnesses to this, madam?—your continued presence in the auditorium, I mean?"

"I sat between my friend Mrs. Gavin here, and my husband. A row of Councillors was behind us. The Mayor and Mayoress, the Town Clerk, and the vicar and his wife were in the front row with me, and..."

"Thank you very much, Mrs. Trevelyan-Twigg. You will appreciate that I am bound to ask these questions. When exactly did you receive the first intimation that Mr. Luton was missing?"

"Well, as I told you, at the end of the interval. We were waiting for the curtain to go up on Scene Two, and, of course, it didn't, so I felt bound to find out why not."

"I understand that you then went on to the stage and informed the audience that one of the actors was ill. What made you say that? You did not know whether it was strictly true, did you?"

"Well, hang it all," said Kitty reasonably, "*you* try standing up in front of the local coshboys and announcing that the chief actor can't be found! If *you* can't imagine the reaction, I can!"

The young detective-constable smiled.

"I take your point, madam. You mean you were anxious to save yourself and others embarrassment. Quite. Very sensible and tactful, I'm sure. Well, as you'll have deduced, we are sure that it must have been during the interval that Mr. Luton met his death. Of course, we are keeping an open mind about what actually happened. Would you know anything about two swords which were used in the production?"

"Only that one of them got mislaid at the last rehearsal. But it was all right on the night."

"I am glad to hear that, madam."

"So poor old Falstaff was murdered," said Laura, when the policeman had gone. "It's what all that added up to. His 'glad to hear that, madam,' was a nice bit of irony, you know."

"Murdered?" cried Kitty, scandalised. "How do you mean—murdered?"

"The swords. Didn't it ring a bell in your mind when he mentioned them? When he said 'stabbed' what he really meant was that somebody must have run Falstaff through with a sword."

Kitty looked horrified and incredulous.

"But you couldn't run anybody through with a *property* sword, Dog," she said—"or could you?"

"So you didn't notice that one of the so-called property swords was a real one? I did."

"Then why on earth didn't you tell me at the time?"

"There didn't seem any point in telling you. They didn't fight a duel with them. I thought nothing of it at all until now, but I bet you Falstaff was killed with the real one."

"That poor little man! He seemed so utterly harmless."

"Yes. I wonder how they managed the rest of it."

"They? Managed the rest of what?"

"Well, all I mean is that two people would have been needed to carry the body down to the river and dump it in the mud."

"I don't see that, Dog. He was ever such a slight little man. Even the cushions, to make him look fat, were inflatable and hardly weighed a thing."

"I suppose the police are asking everybody who was involved with *The Merry Wives* the same questions as this chap asked you. I'm glad you had an alibi for the time when it must have been done."

"But why should I want to kill the poor soul?" wailed Kitty.

"Why should anybody want to? That's one thing the police will have to find out. The means, I would say, are

pretty obvious, and the opportunity presented itself. All that remains to be discovered, as you so rightly point out, is the motive. The only thing is that I don't see how it could have been done during the interval."

"Why not, Dog?"

"Too many people milling about. Think of all those schoolkids! In any case, how many people knew there was going to *be* an interval before you actually announced it to the audience?"

"Nobody but *The Merry Wives* cast, so far as I know."

"Somebody in the cast may have told somebody outside the cast."

"I wonder where those menservants were—those who carried out the basket. Where were they, and what were they doing, when Falstaff was killed?—because I can't believe either of them did it. They were the only nice people in the play, except for that little boy," said Kitty.

"If they didn't do it, what were they doing, and where were they, with fifty-one pubs in the town—beg pardon, borough—and one of them bang opposite the Town Hall? Oh, Kay, don't be such a nit-wit! It would have been the work of a moment to dump the basket and make a quick dash across the high street for a pint, and, if they're innocent, I bet that's exactly what they did. They'd have had heaps of time, knowing about the interval and everything!"

"But their costumes, Dog!"

"What are over-coats for? Think of the coy members of Toc H when we were waiting for the procession to move off! Besides, everybody in the borough knew about the pageant and about the show at the Town Hall. Apart from a beery jest or two—possibly not even that—I don't suppose anybody in the pub bothered about what they looked like. Perhaps some sportsman even stood them a drink."

"What worries me is the thought of that sword—the real one, you know. I ought to have stopped them using it, I suppose, but I simply didn't notice it was real." There was

silence until Kitty added, "The murder *could* have been committed during the interval, I suppose. Do you think they *all* rushed over to the pub?"

"Probably not the women, anyway, and probably not the stage-manager. He'd have had to be on hand to direct the Council workmen who were to put up the scenery for the second scene," said Laura. "But what I *do* think is that Page and Ford would have put off their swords during the interval. Cussed things, swords. Get between your legs and trip you up if you're not jolly careful. Besides, the real sword would have been heavy."

"So anybody could have committed the murder, then, and you've changed your mind. You mean it *was* done during the interval. Oh, but, Dog..."

"Yes, that's the snag, isn't it?"

"How did you guess what I meant?"

"Because I'd just thought the same thing myself. The murderer, unless he was one of the cast, couldn't have known he'd find a weapon all ready to hand, and even the cast couldn't have known that Ford and Page would put off their swords during the interval."

"Whoever did it may have intended to use some other method, Dog, and then spotted the sword and decided it was a better idea."

"Came armed with his own weapon, you mean?"

"You know, the more I think of it, Dog, the more certain I am that your first idea was right, and that it *must* have been done before the interval, and it must have been done by an outsider. Nobody in the cast would have murdered the chief character before the play was over. It's dead against human nature. But how would a stranger get in?"

"By the same way as those comedians went out, of course. You didn't have anybody on duty at the side door, did you?"

"The door that opens on to Smith Hill? No, I didn't. I didn't think it was necessary. I had warned everybody

beforehand, and when I let those awful comedians out I knew they were tight, so I impressed on them about walking uphill to the high street and not downhill into the Thames. I wouldn't have gone backstage at all, except that I was afraid one of them might have hurt himself when he fell."

"You didn't bother about gate-crashers?"

"The house was full. A gate-crasher wouldn't have been able to get a seat, even if he'd known about the side door. And, of course, Dog, you've got to remember that there were plenty of people who had a perfect right to be behind the scenes, apart from the cast and the workmen."

"You mean the mob who were also contributing items to the show? Yes, I appreciate that, and so do the police, I imagine. Well, the two comedians are in the clear, unless they oiled back after you'd seen them off, and I don't suppose they did that."

"I ought to tell the police they were drunk, Dog. They may have been intending a drunken jape and it went too far. Alcohol clouds the judgment, and they were steeped to the hair-parting in it."

That's quite a thought. Assing about with the swords—yes, it's more than possible. That is, of course, *if* they sneaked back. But why should they? I wouldn't mind betting they stayed in the pub until closing time—that is, if they'd got enough money."

"Oh, they'd got enough money. I'd paid them."

"In coin of the realm?"

"Yes, they had two guineas each. I didn't think they'd take a cheque, you see."

"That should have seen them through the evening. Two guineas will buy a lot of beer."

"Yes, but, Dog, would the barman have gone on serving them that long, considering they were plastered already?"

"Hm! I don't really know. But, if he didn't, and they got grouchy, nothing is more likely than that they *did* oil back to the Town Hall and get into mischief."

"Unless they crawled to another pub or two."

"Yes, that's more likely still, I suppose. Oh, well! What about anybody else?"

"The Tots—little nuisances!—stayed in the wings to see and hear the comedians. The formation team cleared them out of the way, I expect, but I bet they were still getting dressed while the interval was on, because the formation team's effort only took about ten minutes, if you remember, and the first scene of *The Merry Wives* was played so fast that *that* didn't take long, either, once their bally scenery was up."

"Yes, kids do take an age to get changed and do up their shoes and all that. But I can't say I can see that vinegar-faced old pussy of theirs running a sword through anybody. What happened to the formation mob when their turn was over?"

"I've no idea. They came in a motor-coach, and were all toggged up ready for the fray, so I suppose they just filtered out. They didn't have to be paid, you see."

"Refreshments?"

"They had those while they were waiting to go on, I expect. The Town Hall laid on coffee, bridge-roll sandwiches, and some cakes, I believe. Anyway, there were sixteen dancers and I suppose they can all alibi one another for the time of the murder."

"Of course, we still don't *know* the time of the murder, do we?"

"Except that I'm quite convinced it must have been before the interval."

"Not necessarily, you know. I've just had another bright thought."

"But, Dog, there were all those schoolchildren about during the interval. Nobody could possibly have got away with murder with *them* around."

"He could if the murder took place *outside* the Town Hall and not *inside* it, you know. Let's suppose that the murderer

gets Falstaff, on some pretence or other, out on to Smith Hill. He inveigles him down to the water's edge, we'll say, and pinks him through the heart. He dumps the body in the mud and trusts that the ebb tide—the river's tidal as far as Teddington—will carry it away. If it doesn't, well, it doesn't matter all that much. If it happened like that, you see, it wouldn't matter *how* many people were milling about during the interval."

* * *

The pageant and its aftermath had taken place on a Thursday. The detective had called on Kitty on the Friday morning, therefore, and the evening paper that day headed its meagre account of Falstaff's death with the caption, *Horseplay Has Tragic Sequel*.

"So that's the way the cat jumps," said Laura. "The police have put up a smokescreen."

The paragraph under the heading was unrewarding. A mock duel, it was suggested, had been fought, and one of the contestants fatally wounded. Those responsible had evidently panicked and had removed the body to the river. The dead man was clad in period costume, and a clothes-basket—one of the properties used in the play—had also been found bogged down in the riverside mud. The dead man, a popular member of the Brayne Dramatic and Operatic Society, was Sidney Matravers Luton. He was unmarried and (the sub-editor had slipped up for once) had left no children.

Laura and Kitty absorbed this information.

"I always *did* say there was a jinx on the wretched pageant," said Kitty, on the Sunday morning. "I wish to goodness I'd never got myself mixed up in it. I ought to have known better, and I did know better, really, but when a nephew comes touting around for assistance, you do rather

find yourself letting yourself in for things. Oh, Lord! The telephone! Now what?"

The call came from the nephew in question. Young Mr. Perse was ringing up his aunt to find out whether she had heard the news. Kitty informed him that she had, whereupon he invited himself round for afternoon tea and offered to place all his inside knowledge at her disposal.

He arrived at four, dressed in a dark lounge suit and wearing a buttonhole.

"Why the foliage?" enquired Kitty, resentfully.

"I sent for thee upon a sad occasion," said Laura. Young Mr. Perse kissed both of them.

"I don't take an evening paper," he said, "but I knew something must have happened to Luton. He didn't show up at Sunday School this morning."

"Sunday School?" queried Laura.

"He was the Sunday School superintendent at the League of Young Hearts chapel. It was left to the secretary-treasurer to conduct the revels. This he did (amid acclaim) by purporting to be a sunbeam."

"A sunbeam?" said Kitty. "But..."

"Yes, I know (although, until this moment, you didn't) he's fat and wears a beard," said her nephew, "but the chosen hymn was about sunbeams and he became one, cavorting about the platform with his thumbs in his waistcoat armholes and his plump little legs twinkling in time to a rather wheezy harmonium."

"But you couldn't have been to Sunday School!" cried Kitty.

"Why couldn't I? You don't realise how thoroughly and to what extent we Councillors go about our duties. We visit schools, Sunday Schools, Church parades, supermarkets, recreation grounds, the Girls' Friendly Society, hospitals, Old People's Homes, orphanages..."

"And the *Old Bull and Bush*, I suppose," said Laura, deeply interested. Perse bowed.

"So it fell to my lot to attend this Sunday School session at ten o'clock this morning, and it was then I decided that something had happened to Luton. The sunbeam act surprised me, you see, and, knowing that Luton usually conducted the revels, I couldn't forbear asking after him, only to be told that the poor chap had been killed."

"What's a Sunday School superintendent doing in a drama club, anyway?" demanded Kitty.

"My *dear* aunt! I should point out that we live in modern times."

"And then to go and get himself killed in this utterly nefarious (right, Dog?) way!" continued Kitty. "Dog and I have talked it over until my head spins. What do *you* know that we don't—or have you come to tea under false pretences?"

"I'm afraid it's under false pretences, dear Aunt Kitty. I was hoping *you* could tell *me* something. I wish now that I hadn't opted out of being present at the Town Hall."

"I'm pretty sure this story of a mock duel with fatal ending is pure boloney," said Laura. "But, actually, we don't know a thing. The police have been here, of course, because of Kitty's tie-up with the show, and I'm sure they think it was murder."

"Do they, by Jove! But a more harmless citizen than Luton couldn't be found! Who on earth could have had it in for him sufficiently to go to the length of doing him in? I don't see why accident should be ruled out. The police would be bound to make enquiries, just as much in a case of accidental death as in a case of suicide or murder."

"Yes, that's true," said Laura. "And, of course, if it *was* an accident, the person who caused it might well be chary of owning up, in case murder was suspected. You mentioned suicide. Was he a suicidal type?"

"I wouldn't have thought so. He had strong religious convictions, but he wasn't morbid and he wasn't fanatical."

“Did you think it odd that the Sunday School secretary-treasurer was playing sunbeams when all the time he knew that Luton was dead?”

“I didn’t think about it in that way, but I suppose it *was* a bit odd of him, wasn’t it?”

“He could bear a bit of watching if it *was* murder,” said Kitty. “I never heard of anything so heartless!”

“Well, the world must keep turning,” said Perse.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Exit a Poor Player

“One is compelled to admit that there is some suspicion attaching to Eadmund’s death.”

Laura was to return to her duties on the Wednesday, and did not anticipate further mystery and excitement, but on the Tuesday evening, at just after half-past six, young Mr. Perse turned up again at his aunt’s flat.

“Oh, *no!*” exclaimed Kitty, when the maid showed him in.

“If it’s chops or cutlets or anything else that has to be counted, I haven’t come to dinner,” her nephew assured her, “so there’s no need for dismay. I just looked in to bring you a bit more news.”

“They haven’t arrested anybody?”

“Not so far as I know. The police are still busy grilling people.”

“How do you mean? They haven’t been here again, anyhow.”

“Well, of course they haven’t,” put in Laura. “There’s nothing you can tell them that’s of any use, and they know it.”

“They’re still keeping up this fiction of an accident while people were skylarking about with those swords,” went on Perse, “but they’re making honest citizens jump through hoops, all the same.”

"I don't believe you know anything about it," said Kitty. "Anyway, as it's chicken, you can stay to dinner if you like."

"Coo, ta, dear (as my landlady's daughter says). I won't say no. Chicken, eh? Free-ranging and country bred, I trust."

"Yes, from Froggett's farm. What's this news with which you've baited your hook?"

"Only that the chap who took the part of Henry VIII in your pageant seems to have disappeared."

"Disappeared? There's been nothing about it in the papers."

"They don't usually put mere disappearances in the papers, unless it's a kid or a Ward of Court, or something. I only happen to know about it by what you might call accident."

"Sit down, and in a minute you can have a drink. I hear your uncle in the hall. When he comes in you can tell us all about it."

"Well," said Perse, when the company was settled down, "it may hardly surprise you to be told that the school meals at our place are so lousy that some of us have formed a sandwich and drinks club. We go twice a week to the local. There are six of us altogether—myself, Bob Lyttleton, Corney Thomas, Teddy Granger, and a couple of chaps from the local Primary School."

"I thought Grammar School masters didn't mingle with the *canaille*," said Laura.

"That point of view, if it ever existed, is outmoded, Auntie Laura. Anyway, we began by passing the time of day with them in the pub and then we gradually teamed up. It must be rotten for these chaps, the only fellows on an otherwise all-women Staff, and with a woman boss into the bargain. Anyway, we fixed up to meet them on Tuesdays and Fridays, when neither they nor we are on dinner duty, and they've proved to be very nice people. Their names are Gordon and Spey. You know them, Aunt Kay, I believe."

"Gordon and Spey?" said Kitty. "Yes, I do seem to know those names. Oh, yes, I remember. Weren't they the two menservants in *The Merry Wives*? Those were the names on the programme."

"They were."

"But you mentioned Henry VIII."

"Yes, Spey was that in your pageant. Gordon was Edward III."

"Oh, I see. I never knew any of the pageantry by name. I suppose those two looked different on the float from what they did in the play. They would have to, of course."

"Yes. Spey wore a beard, of course, as Henry VIII and I suppose he was clean-shaven on the stage. Gordon had an even bigger beard for Edward III, and I imagine he also was clean-shaven on the stage."

"Yes, I see. Well, do go on."

"Right. Well, today being Tuesday, we had our usual get-together at the boozer, but found ourselves one short. We made a civil enquiry and were told that Spey hadn't shown up at school either yesterday or this morning. The Old Cat—Gordon's name for his headmistress—her actual name is Cattrick, so it's not really as rude as it sounds and, actually, he quite likes her—had cut up rough on the Monday, (that's yesterday), because Spey hadn't sent a message, or anything, to say he couldn't be at school, but today, as, again, she'd heard nothing, she seemed a bit worried, Gordon said. She couldn't ring Spey because he isn't on the 'phone, so she asked Gordon to call round and find out whether Spey had been taken ill and was too bad to get a message to school, or didn't have anybody to send." He paused to sip his drink.

"What did Gordon think about that?" asked Kitty's husband.

"He was so little keen on the job that I offered to go with him. 'It's that awful business of poor Luton,' he said. 'The police keep all on to me until I'm hanged if I know whether

I'm coming or going. And now Spey! I tell you that if I go to that house and anything's happened to him, I'll be for it.' Well, of course I told him nothing would have happened to Spey except a dose of 'flu, or a broken leg, or something else quite simple, but he jumped at the idea of my going with him, so we met after school and got some tea in the town, and—we went."

He finished his drink. Twigg poured him another.

"Get on with the tale," he said, "or your aunt will explode."

"Spey is married," proceeded Perse, "but Gordon told me that Mrs. Spey is down in Devonshire nursing an ailing mother, so he's been alone in the house except for a char who comes in once a week to square up. Friday is her day.

"Well, we knocked and rang, but there was no answer, so we concluded that Spey must be pretty seedy and we'd better get inside somehow and see what was what. So we knocked up the neighbours—it's a semidetached house—and told them our troubles and informed them that we intended to break in. They were dubious about this, and advised us to contact the police, but Gordon, who, as he said, has had a bucketful of the police over Luton's death, said that wasn't necessary. He gave them the school number and invited them to ring up and get him identified. Evidently they took this offer as a guarantee of good faith, because they said it didn't matter and shut their front door on us. We went round to the back and, before deciding to force a window, we tried the back door. It wasn't locked or bolted, so we went in.

"On the kitchen table there was a note with a pepperpot on it to keep it in position. It said, *Dear Sir, I have waited till nearly five and must be off to get my old man's tea. Have took my wages from the shillings you keeps handy for the gas, as have my weekend shopping to do and oblige. Mrs. Harmer.* You can see what it all adds up to. Spey must have been missing since after school on Friday, and now it's

Tuesday evening and he hasn't been traced or got any message to the school. We searched the house, of course, but there wasn't a clue."

"It's a very odd business," said Laura.

"I suppose you've told the police?" said Twigg.

"Oh, yes. I've just come from the police station, as a matter of fact. Gordon wouldn't come with me at first, but, as I pointed out, they'd be bound to find out that we'd gone to Spey's house together, so there was no point in making things look fishier for himself than they did already."

"What did the police do?" asked Laura.

"I don't know. They dug out of us all we knew, which was precious little, and I think they're going to contact the charwoman and the school—oh, and Spey's wife, of course, in case she knows where he is. They've got her address. It was wedged into a corner of the blotter on Spey's desk."

"Did Gordon give any indication of what Spey seemed like at school on Friday?"

"I asked him that, Auntie Laura, and he said that Spey and he had a communal belly-ache in Spey's empty classroom at morning break about the way the police were persecuting them about Luton's death, but that, otherwise, he seemed as usual."

"I wonder where the real sword came from—the one the police think was used on Falstaff," said Laura.

"Oh, that's easy enough, I should say. Somebody must have borrowed it from Squire's Acre. I noticed, when we had tea there on the day of the pageant, that old Batty-Faudrey has a positive armoury on his long gallery walls," said Perse.

"Yes, so he has," agreed Kitty. "Not that I took much notice, but now you mention it..."

"What I can't understand," said Laura, "is why the police have fastened on Gordon and Spey."

"I don't think they've been victimised any more than others of the cast," said Perse. "But, as teachers, they're more vulnerable than some of the rest, I suppose, or

perhaps more sensitive. Anyway, I thought you'd like to hear the latest news."

It was not quite the latest news, however. On the following evening Twigg came in with an evening paper and asked whether Kitty and Laura had seen it.

"How *can* we have seen it?" his wife enquired.

"Well, here you are." He handed over the paper. "Here, where my thumb is."

"Good Lord!" said Kitty, scanning the paragraph.

"They've found the body of that man Spey, but it's minus its head!"

"Then how do they know whose body it is?" asked Laura.

"Well, it was dressed in the Henry VIII costume, and Spey is reported missing," said Kitty. "So there it is."

"Still, if it hasn't got a head, I don't see that they can prove it's Spey, costume or no costume."

"But, Dog, who else would have worn it?"

"Almost anybody, I should have thought. Far more likely that Spey's the murderer of Falstaff. After all, the usual reason for decapitating a corpse is to confuse the issue. Spey did in poor little Falstaff and now he's killed another harmless bloke. That's *my* reading of the evidence."

"I thought we'd agreed it wasn't Gordon or Spey. You don't think perhaps there were shades of Anne Boleyn?"

"Shades of Anne Boleyn? How do you mean?"

"Well, it's true that, in the script, Falstaff's basket, with him in it, was stuck into Thames mud, but Falstaff, in Shakespeare's play, wasn't stabbed. As I remember it, he died in bed. As for Henry VIII, well, he cut other people's heads off, not his own."

"Rather difficult to cut your own head off, what?"

"I'm serious, Dog."

"I know you are. Despite the flippancy, so am I. But it's really no business of ours."

"I was responsible for organising the beastly pageant. I feel it all began with that."

"Stop having this feminine guilt-complex. *You* didn't think up the pageant. It was wished on you, so it's nothing to do with you if these burghers do one another in."

"Oh, Dog! How *can* you?"

"What now?"

"You shouldn't have called them burghers."

"Why not? I suppose that's what they are, now Brayne is a borough, isn't it?"

"I can't help thinking of the Burghers of Calais. You know—ropes round their necks, and all that! And that other man, Gordon, was Edward III, don't forget."

"You're letting your imagination run away with you."

"No, Dog, it isn't my imagination; it's my deep-rooted instinct that, from the very beginning, there's been a jinx or a gremlin or some extraordinary hoodoo brooding over this pageant. You can see now how things are going to tie up. Everybody who gets murdered is going to be dressed in the costume they wore at the pageant. It's enough to give me a permanent nightmare."

"Oh, rot! Look here, snap out of it. If Luton had got to be murdered there and then, he'd *have* to be killed while he was wearing the Falstaff costume. That's if he *was* murdered. We don't even know that for certain, although I'm bound to admit that this new development doesn't leave much room for doubt."

"That's all right about Falstaff, but why, after the pageant is over, should Spey have been trotting around looking like Henry VIII?"

"I wonder exactly what he did when he left school on Friday afternoon—because, obviously, he didn't go home."

CHAPTER EIGHT

Councillor Perse Takes a Hand

“...and the fourth horse, inscribed *Broken Down*, represents the position of Mr. Roche.”

Laura returned to Kensington on the following afternoon, there to await her employer, who was not expected in London until the next day. Henri and Celestine, the domestic staff, welcomed Laura. It had been a dull week, they said.

Dame Beatrice returned at the appointed time and she and Laura were kept busy at the London clinic until the second week in June, when most of the patients recovered sufficiently to take their summer holiday, a phenomenon which occurred yearly. Dame Beatrice and Laura, therefore, cruised in a large liner and visited the West Indies, returning to the Stone House in the Hampshire village of Wandles Parva towards the end of July.

Here they were blessed by the society of Laura's son Hamish and two schoolfellows, named Gibbs and Honeybun, until all three went off on a school outing to Yugoslavia by sea.

“Schools are a big improvement on what they were,” said Laura, when she returned from having seen the children safely into the care of a young master of angelic aspect but commanding eye. “It's too marvellous to get rid of Hamish so easily and for three glorious, carefree weeks. I'm glad they're not going to fly, though. I don't like aeroplanes.”

"It is as well, then, that Hamish shares your passion for the sea," said Dame Beatrice. "By the way, a letter came for you. I think it must be from our dear Mrs. Trevelyan-Twigg, from what I remember of her handwriting."

The letter was indeed from Kitty, and it struck a protesting and mournful note. Laura read it twice and then passed it to Dame Beatrice.

"Wouldn't you say that this is an epistle written by a woman wailing for her demon lover?" she enquired. Dame Beatrice handed back the letter as soon as she had read it.

"Mrs. Trevelyan-Twigg certainly appears to be somewhat agitated," she said.

"Yes. Just fancy her wretched nephew wanting to hold *another* pageant! Thinks it may help to bring something to light! Furthermore, thinks the last one didn't really do justice to the history of the borough."

"Well, child, from what I have gathered, it did *not* do justice to the history of the borough. I became interested and made a few notes. It seems that, apart from the Romans and Saxons in general, the Roman commander Aulus Plautius visited the place with elephants. Later on, it was known to Offa of Mercia and was ravaged by the Danes. A synod of the Church was held there, and there Saint Dunstan was given a bishopric. Two kings, Edmund Ironside and Canute, fought a battle at Brayne, the Norman knight Maurice de Berkeley was connected with the place and, in its later history, it housed a Chapter of the Garter. Shakespeare refers to one of its inns, a battle of the Civil War was fought in its streets and it was well-known, during the eighteenth-century elections, to John Horne Tooke and John Wilkes. Tooke, in fact, was the vicar of Brayne at the time."

"Golly!" said Laura, awe-stricken. "But what does he mean about a Hock Day? Some sort of local jamboree and get-together, I suppose? But why hock? I should have thought beer would be more in keeping—or, possibly mead."

“The original Hock Days were festivals held between Easter and Whitsun for the purpose of collecting money. Parts of the town were barred off with ropes and people wishing to enter such streets were mulcted of a small fee before being allowed to go on their way.”

“But you couldn’t do that sort of thing nowadays! It would create chaos. Think of the hold-up of cars! I think Kitty’s nevvie ought to be certified!”

“She will talk him out of the Hocking, I dare say. If she doesn’t, the police will. However, she needs comforting. Invite her to come and stay for a bit. I wonder how soon, if at all, Mr. Perse intends to stage this second pageant?”

This question was answered by Kitty herself when she arrived on the following day.

“He’s spending the whole of his summer holiday getting it all taped out,” she said, “and he’s going to begin rehearsing for it at the end of September, because he wants to have the schoolchildren in it again, and they’ll be finished with holidays by then. I don’t grudge him his bit of fun, and he’s done heaps of research and all that, but he’s planning to do things that make my inside go cold every time I think of them.”

“Such as?” Laura enquired.

“Well, there’s this Hocking business.”

“Don’t worry about that. The police will never let him get away with it.”

“Then there’s this dancing round the sacred oak.”

“What sacred oak?”

“Just outside Brayne there’s a sportsground. It’s part of Brayne Common. Well, in the very middle of the sportsground there’s an oak tree, and one story goes that it had to do with the Druids and is sacred. Anyway, he’s going to have dancing round it, with pagan rites and what-have-you. It’s so heathenish of him.”

“Hardly the original tree, do you think?” asked Laura, declining to comment on the religious aspect.

"I've no idea, Dog. Wouldn't you have to cut it down and inspect its vascular bundles or its annual rings, or something, to establish that? Anyway, another theory is that it used to be the hangman's tree, and the local criminals were strung up on it, and that's not very nice either—leathery corpses hanging in chains, and all that. I don't like it. I can't forget what happened at the last pageant, and I call it flying in the face of Providence to hold another one."

"Have they discovered any more about those two deaths? I've rather lost touch since Mrs. Croc. and I went on that cruise. It's true the purser or someone used to pin up a daily news-bulletin, but it was never about anything but politics and pop-groups. Not a word about anything interesting."

"Well, there were the inquests, of course. My god-forsaken nephew went to both of them. Death by Misadventure in the case of poor little Luton, and murder, by person or persons unknown, in the case of the schoolmaster Spey."

"Have they found his head?"

"No, I don't think so. Gordon, and another master, and one of the doctors at the hospital where he had his appendix out, all identified the body (separately, because I think the police still have their eye on Gordon) and swore to a birthmark on his chest. The doctor had seen it in hospital and the others had been swimming with him. They didn't bother the wife. She was sufficiently upset as it was."

"The police have to accept the verdict in Luton's case, I suppose, but I bet their files are still open. I don't see how the jury could have come to such a conclusion. It was manslaughter, if nothing worse. Death by Misadventure my foot!"

"Well, it was known that some of the cast went over to the pub both before and during the interval, so the coroner put out the suggestion of beery horseplay and the jury accepted it, I suppose. Of course, the fact of the matter, as I

now maintain, is that, beery or not, Gordon did in Luton and then had to finish off Spey because Spey knew all about it."

"Well, it's possible, I suppose. By the way, *did* the real sword come from Squire's Acre?"

"Oh, yes, it was one of a set of four."

"*Four?*"

"Yes, four duelling swords. You know—choice of weapons and all that."

"Have the Batty-Faudreys been given it back?"

"I have no idea. I suppose so."

"It wasn't used after the interval because they didn't do their second scene, so where did the sword get to? Where was it found?"

"Again, Dog, I simply don't know."

"Well, get your nephew to find out."

"All right, I will. Being on the Council doesn't necessarily admit him to the counsels of the police, though."

"Extremely well expressed, if I may say so."

"Oh, well, in my job I sometimes have to make speeches, so I've collected a few useful words such as 'necessarily' and 'counsels,' and 'erratic' and 'influential' and 'trends.' You'd be surprised how often you can bring them in."

"No, I shouldn't. Any more available information?"

"No, but I've got a theory."

"Not another one?"

"It's about cutting off that head. Could it have been done with one of the Saxon swords? They were long and heavy, weren't they?"

"The real ones were, yes, but I doubt whether any of them would be any good nowadays. Besides, the Saxons in the pageant were long-haired schoolgirls who wore swords made from laths, didn't they?"

"Yes, of course. Could the murderer have been disguised as a girl, do you think?"

"Come, come! Teenage girls would have spotted him a mile off and raised hell, if only with screams of laughter. Be your age, dear, do!"

"You don't say that any more, Dog. It's out of date."

"Maybe, but it wasn't a bad old slogan, all the same. It said what it meant, which is more than most of the slogans do nowadays."

"Well, what are we going to do?"

"About what?"

"About stopping Julian from putting on this beastly second-time-of-asking pageant, of course."

"I don't see that there's *anything* to do."

"But somebody else may be killed!"

"Most unlikely, Old Sobersides. Don't be so fanciful, and, above all, don't worry."

"I don't like the way nothing's come out about those other deaths, and I don't like playing with fire, Dog."

"Why not? I bet you went mafficking on Guy Fawkes Night with the rest and the best of us, didn't you?"

"That isn't what I meant."

"I know it isn't, but don't get all tensed up."

"I've got a feeling."

"Yes, so have I, but that's nothing to go by. I've often had one, and nothing's happened at all."

"You may not have known about it. Something may have happened and you not know it."

Dame Beatrice, who had listened with interest to the conversation, decided to intervene.

"I should like," she said, "to be more definitely informed about the deaths which have already taken place. The drama club appears to be involved up to the hilt, and yet, if it was some one or more of them, I should have thought..."

"Yes, I do agree," said Laura. The police would have had the edge on him or them by now. But if not the drama club—well, who?"

"That's just it, Dog," agreed Kitty. "I know there were arguments and jealousies and general eye-scratching and back-biting, but nothing that would justify murder, unless the murderer was mad."

"Any signs of anybody actually trying to bite holes in the carpet?"

"No, there aren't, so far as I know. Of course, I don't know what blood-feuds may have been going on before the actual rehearsals for the pageant, but I do know there was pretty bad feeling then."

"I wonder whether anything definite touched it off? It might be very interesting to know."

"All I know is," said Kitty, forcefully, "that I've shaken the dust of Brayne well and truly off my non-stiletto heels and nothing will induce me to go there again, plead my nephew never so pathetically."

"A pity," said Dame Beatrice. "I was hoping to persuade you and Laura to accompany me there and show me round."

Kitty looked horrified. Then, as Laura laughed, her expression changed.

"You mean you intend to look into these murders?" she asked.

"Say rather that I intend to look into the environment in which these murders took place," replied Dame Beatrice.

"I know what that means," said Kitty. "All right, then. I'll be led to the slaughter, if that's what you want."

"There is something else, if you can arrange it. Would it be possible, do you think, for me to meet your nephew before we go?"

"You think you may be able to pump some information out of him? I doubt whether he knows very much, but you could try. Will you and Laura come to dinner at my flat one evening? I can easily put you up for the night, now that the children are with my sister in Cornwall."

There were six people in all at the dinner. Kitty's husband had invited a colleague who devoted himself to

Kitty during the meal and talked fly-fishing with her husband for the remainder of the evening. Kitty's husband talked mostly to Laura during the meal, and Kitty and Laura talked jobs, children, and old times when it was over. Councillor Perse attached himself inexorably to Dame Beatrice both during the dinner and until he left for his lodgings in Brayne at just after eleven p.m., and talked almost incessantly to her, pausing only when she asked an occasional question.

"Did you find out anything useful?" Laura enquired, when he and the other man had gone, and Kitty and her husband were organising sandwiches and drinks.

"I think I must have found out all that Mr. Perse knows and everything that he suspects. He was extremely expansive."

"Yes, I noticed that."

"Whether what he was able to tell me will be useful, is more than I can say at present. However, he was good enough to promise that he will have a word with the Town Hall staff, so that I shall be allowed every facility to study the stage, the dressing-rooms, and the door which opens on to Smith Hill."

"Oh, well, that's definitely something."

In company with Kitty, they visited Brayne on the following evening between afternoon tea and dinner, to find that young Mr. Perse had been as good as his word, and that they were indeed to have "every facility." The caretaker recognised Kitty at once, saluted the party courteously, and asked where they would like to go. He conducted them ceremoniously to the auditorium, told them that the dressing-rooms were unlocked and that there was nothing to do to the outside door except to turn the handle, and then, with another salute, added that it was all theirs.

Upon this, he left them, and Kitty led the way through swing doors to a corridor which led to the dressing-rooms and the back of the stage.

"Of course," she said, "these rooms are used for different purposes at different times. Sometimes they're used for meetings of sub-committees, because there aren't always shows on, although the place is pretty well booked up by amateurs for most evenings, so I'm told. Anyway, I can tell you how the rooms were allotted for my evening." She opened the doors and left Dame Beatrice to look round. "This was the room the men had. The women, there being only two of them, were given this small room next door. And that's all they actually needed for the play. The Tots had *this* room, the ballet *this* one, and the formation team were in *here*."

There were three rooms which needed no introduction from Kitty. They were clearly marked, in black paint on a primrose yellow surface, *Toilets, Bouquets, Refreshments*.

"Bouquets?" commented Laura, amused. Kitty opened the door, disclosing long wooden tables of the old-fashioned, well-scrubbed, kitchen variety, a sink with a water-tap, two nylon overalls on pegs, and a collection of enamel jugs of all sizes on the floor.

"Well," said Kitty, "I suppose it's a good idea to have a special room fitted up for flowers. If the amateur shows I've been to are anything to go by, not only do all the women who actually have a speaking part or sing solos get a floral tribute, but so do most of the chorus. Those who don't expect to be given one, buy it for themselves, so it's a jolly good idea to have somewhere to put the stuff until it's wanted at the end of the show."

"Was this particular room needed on *your* night?" Dame Beatrice enquired.

"No, they didn't use it, so far as I know. It was agreed no flowers, being Shakespeare, you see."

"I don't see," said Laura. "What's Shakespeare got to do with it?"

"I didn't think it would be reverent to let them have bouquets, Dog, after they'd had the privilege of speaking his

words, so I put an advertisement on all the posters and in the local paper, saying, *No floral tributes will be handed on to the stage*. I knew that would mean there wouldn't be any."

"Yes, I see. Floral tributes must not only be given, they must be *seen* to be given. Quite so. But didn't your Mrs. Page and Mrs. Ford kick?"

"Oh, no, far from it. They were afraid their bouquets (if we'd had any) might be different from each other in number, size, and price. You've no idea, Dog, of what goes on in people's minds once they set foot on a real stage in front of a real audience."

"What about the other acts? As I remember it, didn't you have a ballet and so forth?"

"Oh, but they're *serious* people, Dog! They wouldn't *dream* of accepting bouquets from their friends. Anyway, their ballet mistress wouldn't let them. She charges them the earth for their lessons and rules them with a sort of jack-boot fearfulness which is absolutely petrifying. I don't know how on earth they stick it. My theory, having seen and heard the old dragon in action, is that, having joined, they simply don't dare to leave."

"There is that, of course. What happens if she chucks them out?"

"Oh, she never chucks anybody *out*, Dog. She's got her living to earn. Just tells them they're not ready to perform in public. Anyway, as I've just pointed out, this is the room the ballet had, and next door we put the Tots."

"Weren't they too noisy to be put next door to anything cultural?"

"Oh, well, the *signora* screeches at her company all the time, without ever letting up, so I didn't think an extra bit of yelling would matter. This, again as I said, and sorry to repeat myself but I do want Dame Beatrice to get it clear, is the room we gave the formation team. They came ready dressed, but we had to give them somewhere to hang about

until it was their turn to go on, and this room has a little annexe where the girls could restore their make-up, so we didn't need to separate them from their partners. They spend the whole time practising steps, you know. Formation dancing is...what's the word I want?"

"Obsessional?"

"Yes, that's it. It's a sort of bug."

"You mean it's a sort of dedication."

"Do I? Oh, well, anyway, we didn't give the school choirs a room because we'd had them in the gallery until the interval, so we just showed them the toilets and lined them up in the corridor where they got biscuits and soft drinks to keep them happy until we wanted them."

"Yes, I see," said Dame Beatrice. "And now may we go on to the stage?"

"One thing," said Laura, as Kitty showed the way to the stairs which led up to the wings on the O.P. side. "What about your two comedians? Didn't they need a dressing-room?"

"Not one of their own. We pushed them in with the drama club. There was plenty of space, and theirs was the second act, so they left the building as soon as they had finished their turn. And was I glad to see the back of them!"

"Are you sure they left the building?" asked Dame Beatrice.

"Oh, yes. They packed their traps and went across the road for beer. I saw them off and warned them about Smith Hill and the river."

"They could not have come in again by the front entrance?"

"Not without a ticket. Why, you don't suspect *them* of killing Falstaff, do you?—although we *did* wonder, their being tight, you know—"

"No, most emphatically I do not, but it is as well to eliminate as many people as possible as soon as possible."

The three went on to the stage and Kitty pointed out that there were three entrances—from the Prompt Side, from the O.P. side, and, in addition, a cunningly concealed one in the middle of the back-drop.

“Just in case you want to have the Demon King burst in with a clap of thunder, or the ballet suddenly erupt from somewhere unexpected,” she explained.

“And which of the entrances or exits was used for carrying Falstaff off the stage?” Dame Beatrice enquired.

“Oh, they dragged him off on the Prompt Side. It was nearest to the dressing-room, you see. And as the two menservants had to come on again in Scene Two—not that we had it, of course—they wanted as much time in the pub as they could get, I suppose. Oh, and that’s another thing. I suppose they could swear—and probably did—to the comedians having been in the pub.”

“That can be established, I suppose,” said Laura, “unless the comedians had left the pub by then.”

“Not they,” said Kitty, in a confident tone. “If ever I saw a couple of men who intended to make a night of it, they were the ones. We’ve talked about this already.”

“Yes, we agreed they might have done a pub-crawl. Where now, Mrs. Croc., dear?”

“Now for the door which opens on to Smith Hill,” said Dame Beatrice. Smith Hill proved to be a short, steep, cobbled slip-way which began at the High Street and ended at the muddy borders of the Thames opposite a small, willow-fringed eyot. There was a street-lamp at the High Street end and a yard or so of green and slippery stones at the edge of the river. The slime showed the high-tide limits.

“I wonder what the state of the tide was that night,” said Laura, studying the uncompromising and unbeautiful little passage.

“I’ve no idea,” said Kitty. “As I said, we warned people leaving by the side door to be sure to walk uphill, that’s all I know.”

"Well, they'd naturally aim for the street-lamp, wouldn't they?"

"I should have thought so. Anyway, the water affected nobody but poor Falstaff, and he, presumably, didn't choose the way he went."

"Did you get anything important from our tour of the Town Hall?" asked Laura, when dinner was over and she and Dame Beatrice were travelling back to Wandles Parva and the Stone House.

"Well, I noted one possibility," Dame Beatrice admitted. "I can't, of course, tell who the murderer was, but I have an idea that I know where the deed was done."

"Yes, something to do with that room labelled *Bouquets*. That struck me, too. I deduce three nylon overalls, one of which has either been destroyed by the murderer or impounded by the police. I expect the murderer wiped the sword on it, you know, and then probably washed the blood off the floor with it, too. He'd have access to plenty of water in that particular room."

"I think you have made a reasonable deduction."

"Well, there's no doubt in my own mind that *Bouquets* is where the deed was done, and, if so, it throws the thing wide open again. You remember old Kitty's telling us she'd placarded the town? Anybody—but simply *anybody*—could have known that the room would be empty."

"There is still the vexed question as to whose hand wielded the sword. It does not seem possible, if the sword was the weapon used, that the killing took place before the interval, because the sword would still have been on the stage, and yet it seems highly unlikely that the killer would have been undetected if the interval itself was the time when the deed was done. It is extremely puzzling." She looked expectantly at Laura.

"Well," said Laura, "I can't get any further. We're not even officially concerned, and that means we can't question the Town Hall staff with any hope of getting them to tell us

anything they may know. Anyway, I'm sure that, from the very beginning, the police knew it was murder. You could tell they did, from the way the detective questioned old Kitty."

"That is not proof in itself. The verdict was Death by Misadventure. It seems to me that the police would attempt to find out how that misadventure was caused."

"Like deaths in motoring accidents, you mean? I suppose there is that, of course."

"And now for Henry VIII," said Dame Beatrice. "Here there seems no possible reason for doubt."

"Murder most foul," agreed Laura.

"Of course," said Dame Beatrice, "the sword used to kill Mr. Luton was wiped on the linen in the clothes-basket. There would be no other reason for putting the basket into the Thames."

"Oh, in the hope that the blood would be washed away. Yes, I see."

"The door on to Smith Hill has a Yale lock," said Dame Beatrice thoughtfully. Laura looked expectantly at her, but Dame Beatrice added nothing to this statement.

CHAPTER NINE

The Death of Henry VIII

"One of the most popular games, however, was what may be called chasing the ox."

"As I see it," said Laura, "there must be all sorts of permutations and combinations, any one of which could lead to the right answer. Let's just see what we've got, shall we?—beginning with the death of Falstaff, whether murder or not."

"I am all attention."

"Wouldn't you like to speak first?"

"Not at all. I shall be most interested to hear your views. I confess that, so far, I can see only one ray of light, and that, to my mind, is not sufficient to journey by."

"I wonder whether you're thinking the same as I am?"

"It is not unlikely. Pray proceed."

"Would it help us to find out when the other property sword got lost or mislaid?"

"It might. It was not used at the dress rehearsal, you tell me, and that is all we know."

"Perhaps we could find out at which rehearsal it was used."

"I don't suppose it was used at any rehearsal, child. You have some experience of amateur theatricals, and I am not entirely without knowledge of them myself. It is customary for the costumes and properties to be hired only for the week of the performance, I believe. But it is idle for us to

speculate. We need precise information. I wonder whether the Brayne company has a wardrobe mistress?"

"Well, they've got a stage-manager. I expect he'd know about the props. I'll get his address and number from old Kitty."

She did this forthwith and immediately telephoned the stage-manager, mentioning Kitty's name and requesting the favour of an interview.

"Are you connected with the police?" was the cautious query in a woman's voice.

"Not directly, no."

"Are you a reporter, then?"

"Oh, no, certainly not."

"Do you wish to join the club?"

"No. We wanted to see the Brayne stage-manager about hiring costumes and props."

"Oh, I see. Well, I can give you the address of the people they hire from. Won't that do?"

Laura gave in and agreed that that would do. She took down the address as the woman dictated it, thanked her, and rang off.

"The answer's a lemon," she informed Dame Beatrice. "It was obvious that his wife, or whoever she is, wasn't going to extend an invitation to us to visit him."

"She has my sympathy. I expect they have had a surfeit of visitors since these mysterious deaths were first reported in the newspapers."

"If we briefed old Kitty, I wonder whether *she* would muscle in?"

"I daresay she would, but, as I said before, apart from taking a purely academic interest in what has occurred, I do not think we have any right to involve ourselves in the business."

"But you said you had a ray of light, and it seems pretty certain that the police haven't even got that. I mean, there can't be any doubt now, as we've agreed, but that Falstaff

was murdered. You said yourself that the death of Henry VIII proves that, if any proof was needed. I'll get on to old Kitty, then, shall I?"

"Go and see the costumiers first. It may strengthen your hand."

"Are you coming with me?"

"No. You will manage better on your own."

The costumiers lived in south-east London. The house consisted of two floors and a basement and the place was crammed with theatrical costumes and accessories of all descriptions. The atmosphere was claustrophobic and depressing, but there were several eager customers and the woman who admitted Laura informed her that she would be attended to as soon as possible and invited her, in the meantime, to "have a good look round, dear, and see if there's anything you fancy."

After about a quarter of an hour, during which Laura studied a long stand whose coathangers held samples of the costumes of every period from Roman to Early Victorian, a man in a frock coat of 1895 vintage and wearing a luxurious toupee of silver-grey, came up and asked what he could do for her.

"The costume of an Elizabethan gentleman," said Laura.

"Just the one, madam?"

"No, I shall need two."

"Just so. I will give you a form to fill in."

"Oh, yes? What for?"

"Well, madam, we shall need to know chest and leg measurements."

"Oh, I see. I wonder whether you could show me one or two of the costumes? I should like to have some idea of colour."

"Certainly, madam, although you'll appreciate we cannot guarantee that the colour you select will necessarily be the size the gentlemen require in the costumes. Come this way, madam."

There was a pretty fair selection and the clothes were in good condition.

"I believe you recently fitted out a production of a Shakespeare play," said Laura, casually.

"We are always fitting out Shakespearian productions, madam. They are extremely popular with amateurs. No royalties to be paid, you see."

"Oh, yes, I suppose that's so." She wondered just how far she should go, and decided to hold back for a bit. She would gain nothing by a direct enquiry if these people had already been visited by the police. She busied herself by closely inspecting the Elizabethan costumes.

"Is your enquiry on behalf of young or rather older gentlemen, madam?" enquired the man, at last.

"As a matter of fact, one of them is for me and the other for my brother."

"Then, if I might make a suggestion..." he eyed Laura's generous proportions..."would you not consider an Elizabethan *lady's* costume for yourself? Then you and the gentleman would make a pair, would you not?"

"If it was for a fancy dress ball, yes, we would. But it seems impossible to get enough men to fill the parts in an amateur dramatic society, so you see..."

"Oh, perfectly, madam."

"Well, so far as colour goes, there doesn't seem anything in it. I'd rather like blue for myself, but it wouldn't really matter. The costumes would have to be different colours, of course. It wouldn't do for both to be alike. Oh, I suppose the hire of the costumes includes hats and shoes and swords?" said Laura, as though this was an afterthought.

"Hats are included. Shoes and swords would be extra."

"I see. I should have thought shoes would be included as an essential part of the costume."

"We used to include them, madam, but were forced to discontinue the custom, since so many times we got back

either no shoes at all, or merely the one. Swords also either did not come back at all, or were bent and damaged."

"Now that you charge, do you have the same trouble?"

"No, madam. A deposit equal to the value of the shoes and sword is payable upon hire and is returnable, less the charge for hiring."

"So you never lose anything now?"

"Not since we introduced the new system, madam."

"Not even a sword?" asked Laura, pressing her point.

"No, we have never lost a sword, madam, but some weeks ago we lost two valuable costumes. A group had ordered them from a place called Brayne. You may have read about the unhappy event there in which a young gentleman lost his life in some rough horseplay during a performance?"

"Oh, I believe I did read something about it," said Laura carelessly. "Didn't they do *The Merry Wives of Windsor*?"

"I believe that was it, madam. It was all extremely unfortunate. You see, we overlooked the necessity for a second sword, so I understand that a real sword was used, and caused the accident. Then there was a second death, and the two costumes have been retained by the police. I am still in correspondence with the club secretary for the cost of their replacement."

"Oh, dear! Won't the police send them back, then, later on?"

"It would be impossible to let either costume go out again, madam. I understand that both are stiff with blood."

Laura left, bearing with her a printed form on which she could record measurements and descriptions of the costumes she was to hire. She returned to Dame Beatrice with the results of her interview and observed that she thought she had been wasting her time. Dame Beatrice disagreed.

"The missing property-sword is now accounted for," she said, "so a minor mystery has been cleared up, and I feel

that every little helps.”

“I can’t see how this helps. The murderer couldn’t have known that the costume people wouldn’t send it.”

“No, of course not. That is what causes me to think that the murder had not long been premeditated.”

“But you think it *was* premeditated?”

“I am sure it must have been, and, if we only knew the motive, I feel sure we could name the murderer. In any case, it was somebody who knew that a real sword had been borrowed.”

“That brings us back to the cast again. Nobody else would have known.”

“Except the person or persons who lent the sword, of course.”

“Old Kitty is pretty sure it was borrowed from Squire’s Acre Hall. She told us so, if you remember.”

“Well, no doubt the police have satisfied themselves upon that point.”

“Incidentally, she didn’t spot that one of the swords was a real one, whereas I did. How do you make that out?”

“Subconsciously, your gymnastic training made you realise that the two swords, as worn during the performance, although they were similar in appearance, differed in weight.”

“Yes, they hung differently, I remember. But why didn’t old Kitty spot the same thing? I mean, clothes (with which she is, as you know, so closely associated) differ in hang and in weight, too.”

“Between clothes and what are termed, I believe, accessories, there is a substantial difference. I doubt whether Mrs. Trevelyan-Twigg would trouble herself about the difference in weight between two handbags or two pieces of imitation jewellery, for example, provided that these were appropriate to the garment which was being displayed.”

"Strikes me as a moot point, but you always have an answer to everything."

"I doubt that very much. However, I suggest that we leave our unfruitful speculations regarding the death of Falstaff, and turn our attention to the equally mysterious death of Henry VIII. Of this we know very little. His, of course, is the other costume the police have retained, therefore it is clear that the dramatic society hired their pageant costumes and the costumes for the play from the same firm. We must find out more about the death of Mr. Spey."

"I'd better go to the library tomorrow and ask to look at all the newspapers we missed while we were on our cruise."

"We can do better. I have requested our dear Robert to come and see me. I know that he is not in charge of the case, but I have no doubt that, in his position at Scotland Yard, he is fully informed about it. I propose to pick his brains."

"If any," said Laura, who made a point of belittling her husband in case anyone should suspect that she was still in love with him.

Detective Chief-Superintendent (recently promoted) Robert Gavin presented himself for lunch.

"Well, Casanova!" said his wife, when he was shown in. "So you've been making love to Mrs. Croc., behind my back, have you?"

"On the contrary," replied Gavin, kissing her before she could prevent him, "*she* has been making love to *me*. And what could be nicer? Well, what's Kitty's next-of-kin been up to?"

"He isn't her next of kin, but he *is* a perishing nuisance. So are you, but at least you can give us the information we're in need of."

"And that is?"

"About Henry VIII, chump."

"I only know about his wives. They were (in order of appearance) Catherine of Aragon, Anne Boleyn, Jane Seymour, Anne of Cleves, Catherine Howard, and Catherine Parr. In other words, as they 'learnt' us at school, they were 'divorced, beheaded, died; divorced, beheaded, survived.' What with his narrow choice of his wives' names and his equally narrow choice of his wives' fates, bluff King Hal can hardly, in my estimation, be called an original thinker."

"Granted, and now quit stalling."

"Well, not an awful lot is known, and what *is* known is rather bizarre."

"So we gathered, but, you see, by the time we got back from our cruise I suppose it was all old hat."

"There wasn't much in the papers, as a matter of fact. All that we know is as follows: the police, naturally enough, picked on the two actors who'd carried Luton off the stage..."

"Yes, we know all about that. The police gave them a stinking time, and then Spey was killed."

"Yes, indeed. They were very closely questioned, but there was nothing to connect them with Luton's death. It seems to be established that they dumped the basket down in the wings and tore off to the public house."

"Where was Falstaff's page? He was off stage at the time. Didn't *he* see anything?" asked Laura, struck by a sudden idea.

It seems not. The misguided child was restoring his tissues and replacing lost energy by consuming sticky buns, sausage rolls, and soft drinks in the room set aside for refreshments. As a member of the cast, he had his for free, and apparently did himself proud. His presence at the buffet table is sworn to by the couple of stout-hearted ladies who were serving behind the counter there."

"Having given the place the once-over," said Laura, "I'm convinced that Falstaff was persuaded to go into the washroom which is labelled (believe it or not) *Bouquets*. I'm

sure the murder took place there, and that they washed the blood off their hands under the water-tap and disposed of the nylon overalls they put on over their stage-clothes to prevent them getting bloodstained."

"There were only two nylon overalls kept in the room, I'm told. Both have been accounted for and neither is bloodstained."

"That's nonsense!"

"How so, dear heart?"

"There must be four overalls. They'd have to be laundered, so there would be two on and two off, don't you see? I thought three at first, but there must have been four."

"There were only two overalls, Laura. Everything at the Town Hall has been very carefully checked and only one woman had charge of that particular room, so only two overalls were considered necessary. Unless there was a 'do' on, involving flowers, the two overalls, both clean, stayed put on their pegs, and that's where the police found them."

"Oh, I see. That disposes of that, then. Now tell us about Henry VIII. You said the whole thing was bizarre. Because the corpse had been beheaded, do you mean?"

"That, of course, but, in addition, the chap was not only wearing the Henry VIII costume, but the body was lying at the side of a private road leading to a ducal mansion where the body of Henry himself rested one night on the way to its burial at Windsor."

"Is it known why the fancy dress?"

"No, but the other chap, Gordon, put out a plausible theory. He said that Spey fancied himself in the get-up and had probably kept it on hire to be photographed in it. But even if he did, I can't see that it helps much. It couldn't supply any clues to motive or opportunity."

"What about the means?"

"We don't know until we find the head. There were no marks of violence on the body and there was no trace of poison."

"How long had he been dead?"

"For several days. The road is very little used, especially in the early morning, and a fellow who had a job to do in the park found the body on the Tuesday at eight o'clock or thereabouts. He reported it up at the house—the family are not in residence—and the factotum there immediately telephoned the police. The police doctor examined the body at about nine o'clock and in his report he stated that *rigor* had completely passed off."

"Meaning?"

"Well, the onset is about five or six hours after death, and *rigor* isn't complete, under ordinary circumstances, until twelve to eighteen hours have elapsed. It lasts about another twelve hours and then takes about the same time to pass off. Of course, *rigor* is only a rough guide. It depends upon all sorts of factors, including the previous health of the deceased, his age, the degree of fatigue or shock, the temperature of the place where the body was found—all very important and misleading."

"Yes, I see. Anything more to tell?"

"I don't think so. Except for the usual give and take among the members of the drama club, he doesn't seem to have made any enemies. You probably know as much about him as the police do. He didn't owe money, or go off with somebody else's wife, or belong to the Mafia or..."

"But he must have been a menace to *somebody*. He must have had the goods on whoever murdered Falstaff."

"Such is the theory of the police, who, whatever the verdict at the inquest may have been, still think Luton met with foul play and are keeping their files open with that supposition in mind. I wonder whether Spey himself hired the Henry VIII costume in which he was found dead, or whether the drama club did? Not that it makes any difference, I suppose."

"I can answer that one," said Laura. She described her visit to the costumiers.

"Wouldn't the drama club have had photographs taken? These amateurs usually do," said Gavin.

"Those would be taken in groups, I imagine. This, if Mr. Spey had decided to be photographed separately, would have been a private venture," said Dame Beatrice.

"Old Kitty certainly had what you might call official photographs taken of the pageant, so did the local paper. There was one of each lorry-load," said Laura, "but no individual Vanity Fairs were allowed, so far as the actual pageant was concerned."

"I wonder whether you have noticed that these bizarre affairs have a common denominator?" said Dame Beatrice. Gavin looked interested.

"Bizarre?" he said. "Oh, yes, we're agreed on that, all right, but what's this common denominator?"

"It may be an imaginary one. It probably is. All the same, Falstaff, in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, was attempting to seduce two married women. Henry VIII was, to put it vulgarly..."

"A womaniser, the lecherous old pest. Yes, I grant you that, but it seems a pretty slender connection to me."

"It is, indeed. I don't know why it came into my mind."

Laura remained silent, allowing her own mind to dwell on the idea. Then she said:

"If you're right—and you always *are* right—we ought to track down Edward III and give him a broad hint."

"Give him a broad hint?"

"Yes. Alice Perrers, you know."

"I don't think I have heard of Alice Perrers."

"To be perfectly honest, neither had I, until old Kitty wised me up on the subject. It seems that this Alice Perrers was Edward III's—how shall I put it?"

"Paramour?" suggested Gavin.

"That's it. On his death-bed she tried—may have succeeded, for all I know—anyway, she was after his rings. Of course, Queen Philippa was dead by then."

"Surely Mrs. Trevelyan-Twigg did not wish to feature Alice Perrers in the pageant?" demanded Dame Beatrice. Laura chuckled.

"You'd be surprised at what she wished to do," she said. "Her idea was to have the scene enacted on the stage at the Town Hall with herself in the star role, a part written *for* herself *by* herself."

"Really?"

"Well, you know what a lunatic she can be when she puts her mind (so-called) to it. Anyway, the drama club didn't see eye to eye with her, so the project was scotched, together with a chunk of the early boyhood of Shelley. She'd got a kid all lined up for the part and she was going to dress him in a Fauntleroy suit. She was prepared to babble for hours about his golden hair and his large grey eyes and his hoarse riverside voice and his one and only vowel sound. I was obliged to gaff her."

Dame Beatrice cackled, but her sharp black eyes and beaky little mouth became stern again as she said:

"I am prepared to concede that my common denominator is a figment of my imagination, and I could not think of drawing the attention of the local police to it, but, in order, as you would put it, to leave no stone unturned, we will find out where to contact the man who was Edward III. *Did* an Edward III actually take part, by the way?"

"Oh, yes. He was in the pageant on one of the floats with Queen Philippa and the burghers of Calais."

"And no Alice Perrers?"

"And no Alice Perrers."

"Then that may break our sequence."

"Yes, I see what you mean. Falstaff and Henry VIII were shown up, so to speak, in the midst of their sins, but Edward III—yes, I do see what you mean. All the same, there's something so haywire and unnecessary about these murders that I still think we might drop a word in season. You see, it's not as though these two dead men were the

real Falstaff or the *real* Henry VIII. They were only amateur actors. The thing doesn't really make sense."

"No," agreed Dame Beatrice meekly, "I can see that it does not."

Laura snorted at this display of humility and then said, "All the same, I should like to contact old Kitty and find out where Gordon, this Edward III chap, hangs out, and tip him the wink."

"I am not entirely sure that that will be necessary. Do you not think that, after the two violent, unexplained deaths, the members of the drama club will be sufficiently alert to the possibility of their own danger?"

"I'd rather leave no stone unturned," said Laura. "You don't mind if I get on to old Kitty?"

"Do so, by all means."

"Before you do that," said Gavin, "let's get all the facts clear in our minds and, to the facts, I'll add the conclusions the police have arrived at, and then Dame Beatrice can sift the lot, if she's a mind to, and let us have her deductions, if any."

"Go ahead," said his wife.

"Well, as you probably know, there was more than a bit of stress and strain between members of the drama club. The members, interviewed individually by the police, have been pretty cagey about the quarrels, *except* for Gordon and Spey, who asserted, at more than one official interview, that neither of them had any personal quarrel with any other member, but that the atmosphere had become so tense and disagreeable with the continual carping and wrangling they had taken counsel with one another and had almost made up their minds to resign from the club as soon as the play and the pageant were over."

"I don't blame them," said Laura. "Nothing gets on my nerves like bickering and general unpleasantness."

"Didn't know you had any nerves. However. The rows seem to have started over the choice of play and then over

the casting. All the same, nothing that was said or done gave a motive for murder, therefore the police have washed out the quarrels—as a matter of fact, I gather that the shock of Luton's death did that—and are looking elsewhere for the cause of the crime."

"I shouldn't think Falstaff was the type to have pinched somebody else's girl-friend, and, from what we know of him, he couldn't have been a blackmailer," said Laura.

"How do you know?"

"Well, he was a Sunday School superintendent."

"Norman Thorne was a Sunday School teacher and so was his murdered fiancée. Thorne didn't scruple to kill her, and there's no doubt *she* was trying to blackmail *him* into marrying her."

"Yes, but Falstaff wasn't like that. He was a most meek and inoffensive little man."

"So are lots of people, no doubt—Crippen, for one. All the same, there is some reason why the death, even of meek little men, will benefit somebody, so they get bumped off just the same."

"All right, I give in. Go on. You mean that the police haven't found the cause of the crime, any more than we have."

"Correct. Now, apart from the death itself, there is an unexplained circumstance which needs to be cleared up."

"I can do that one, I think. The police would like to know who borrowed the sword with which the deed was done."

"You are right, but only up to a point. Nobody seems to know who borrowed the sword. The chaps who played Ford and Page would seem to be the obvious choices, since they were the only people to require swords."

"Falstaff *ought* to have had a sword, I should have thought. After all, he was a knight and therefore entitled to one, I suppose. The professional Falstaffs always seem to sport a sword."

“Well, Luton didn’t have one. Everybody is certain about that. Ford and Page vigorously deny having borrowed a sword, both declare—and there are witnesses to it—that during the interval both took off their swords. They say they left them on chairs in the dressing-room, and there are witnesses to that, too, and nobody seems to have touched them. Page went on to the stage to supervise the setting-up of the scenery for the second part of the play, and was helped by Dr. Caius, a chap named Spenning, while Ford nipped across to the pub, accompanied by Sir Hugh Evans (real name Griffiths) and Justice Shallow, otherwise Bence, the other men in the cast. They found Gordon and Spey already there, and also the two comedians who had completed their act nearer the beginning of the programme.”

“So what it all boils down to is that everybody in the cast except the two women has a watertight alibi, but only if the murder was committed during the interval. If it was committed *before* the interval...”

“It wasn’t committed during the interval, Laura. The police have taken dozens of statements—everybody backstage has been interviewed, even the Tots—and, but for Falstaff himself, there isn’t one single, solitary person, man, woman, or child, who was alone for an instant during the interval except under the usual, unavoidable circumstances—and even then there was a queue, the Town Hall facilities being limited. There’s no doubt whatever that Falstaff was killed either before the interval or else he was spirited away—which doesn’t seem likely—and was killed when the show was over and everybody had gone home.”

“Do the police still suspect Gordon and Spey?”

“As we think it was done before the interval, yes, but, of course, Spey is out of the picture, in one sense, now that he’s dead. Remains Gordon. The only other solution...”

“Is that an outsider saw Spey and Gordon nip over to the pub as soon as they had carted Falstaff off the stage...”

“And got in by the side door, stabbed Falstaff, and plonked the body and then the basket in the Thames. Yes. The only snag there is the Yale lock, unless the murderer had already concealed himself on the premises or had a key to the side door.”

“Yes, of course. But what did he stab him *with*?—not that it requires much thinking out.”

“Exactly. What did he stab him with? And, as you suggest, there’s an obvious answer. *Two* real swords must have been borrowed and only one accounted for. The murderer did the borrowing and hung on to the extra sword. Our lads have been to Squire’s Acre and interviewed the Colonel and his lady and also the nephew who lives with them at the Hall, and have closely inspected their armoury. The answer’s a lemon, so you’d better see what Kitty can dredge up. Instruct her to put her subconscious mind to work. It’s possible that something may come to the surface. Motive is what we’re after.”

“Right. Well, now, what about Henry VIII? Anything—any pointer there?”

“Well, the police have had a go at his wife, poor woman. What with spending weeks nursing a sick mother and now the shock of Spey’s death, she’s in a pretty poor way. She is certain her husband had no enemies. She thinks he was killed by a madman and has asked the police to keep a watch on her house. She’s run down, grief-stricken, and terrified. I’m sure she’s got nothing helpful to tell us, so I’ve suggested that we ship her back to her mother’s house. She’ll feel safer there, and the old lady seems to have recovered from her illness, so I’m sure it’s the best thing to do. The doctor wouldn’t hear of our showing her Spey’s body, so, as it was quite easy to get it identified by three independent witnesses, we conceded the point, and I’m jolly glad we were able to.”

“Is there any indication of where the murder and the decapitation of Spey took place?” Dame Beatrice enquired.

“Nothing at all, so far, except in the negative sense that neither took place in the ducal back-lane where the body was found. The neighbours think they heard Spey go out on that Friday night, but he often did while his wife was away, so they thought nothing of it and didn’t even notice the time.”

“So they would not be able to tell you whether he was carrying a suitcase,” said Dame Beatrice.

“A suitcase? Oh, you mean for the fancy dress outfit he had on when he was killed.”

“Yes. It might have occasioned no surprise to passers-by to see a protagonist strolling about in period costume on the night of the pageant, but, on a normal Friday evening, the spectacle of Henry VIII striding along Brayne high street would have occasioned remark, one would suppose.”

“You’re right. The point about the suitcase is a good one. I’ll put the lads on to it. I wish the neighbours would pin down the time for us, though.”

“I doubt very much whether they did hear him go out on that particular evening.”

“You mean that, in view of the fact that the charwoman’s note was still open on the kitchen table when Gordon and Kitty’s nephew went into the house, the inference is that Spey went straight off somewhere after school and did not enter his house on the Friday evening at all?”

“It seems to me quite possible.”

“So it does to me, but that means he must have taken the Henry VIII outfit with him to school on the Friday morning. The school has scarcely come into the enquiry as yet. We’d better have a detective go round and interview the headmistress, unless—no, I’ll tell you what! I wonder whether you and Laura would undertake that bit of investigation for us? A couple of women visitors in and around a school invite no speculation or comment, whereas a couple of Brayne policeman, even in mufti, would almost

invariably be noticed. Could you do that for us, do you think?"

"Certainly," Dame Beatrice agreed. "All we shall establish is that Spey had a suitcase with him when he arrived at school in the morning."

"In the morning? Oh, yes, of course, it was one of his days for having sandwiches at the pub. You might be able to find out whether he accounted for the suitcase in any way."

"He would give a simple and obvious reason for taking it to school."

"Going to spend the weekend with his wife and her mother. Yes. Hm! That won't get us much farther."

"Why wouldn't he have said he was going to have his photograph taken in the Henry VIII costume?" demanded Laura.

"He'd have been hooted out of the Staff-room, I should think," her husband replied.

"That's a pity, because, if he'd come clean about the photograph, he might also have said where he was going to have it taken."

"True. Oh, well, if you and Dame Beatrice are willing to have a go at the school, I'll be very much obliged."

* * *

There was nothing to be gained at the school except the information that Spey had had a suitcase with him when he turned up on the Friday morning. No questions had been asked by his colleagues about this, and no information had been volunteered by Spey. It was assumed by Gordon, in common with others, that Spey proposed to spend the weekend with his wife and her sick mother, and that this accounted for the suitcase. He repeated his former theory, however, that Spey had retained the Henry VIII costume in order to be photographed in it.

On the following day Laura went along to see Kitty.

CHAPTER TEN

Mistress Ford and Mistress Page

"The Butts Common was frequently used for sports of this description."

"So that's it, Dog, is it?" asked Kitty earnestly. They were just finishing lunch at Kitty's Knightsbridge flat.

"So that's it," Laura agreed. "And now, old school friend and college chum, what about it?"

"What about what?"

"Who did in those two blighters, and why?"

"You shouldn't call them blighters, Dog."

"Oh, yes, I should. I've just been reading a book [*A Calendar of Murder—Criminal Homicide in England since 1957*—Terence Morris and Louis Blom-Cooper.] about all this. The victim almost always contributes to his own death. It's all rot to think that the victim is always innocent. Unless the killer is a madman, the victim is as guilty as the chap who killed him. Look at Neary and Howard."

"How can I, Dog? I didn't know either of them."

"Be yourself," said Laura, sternly. "What was it about this Falstaff and this Henry VIII that should have made some person or persons (unknown) decide to murder them?"

"But, Dog, how on earth should I know?"

"Stiffen the sinews, summon up the blood. You must have seen something, or heard something... *Think!* Bend the brain!"

"Look, Dog, I didn't see or hear a thing. I grant you there was the usual give and take in that drama club, but there was nothing that could possibly lead to murder. You've got a bee in your bonnet, as usual."

"I never have a bee in my bonnet. I see things steadily and I see them whole."

"But you don't, Dog. You're too imaginative. Now I," said Kitty smugly, "am a practical working woman."

"Granted. Now tell me what you suspect. I shan't do anything about it. I shall simply refer it to Mrs. Croc., so be of good cheer, brave heart."

"That's all very well, Dog, but you can't just count on a hunch."

"Why not? I always do. What hunch did you have?"

"Well, I'm not exaggerating, Dog, when I tell you that I always had a feeling."

"What sort of feeling?"

"I've told you before. I never have liked the idea of this pageant. I don't really know why I took it on. I was talked into it by Julian. He said it was my bounden duty. Well, you know how it is, Dog. You're sitting pretty, minding your own business, and raking in a certain amount of well-earned cash, and then comes along some persuasive nephew and tells you there are people worse off than yourself, which of course, you readily agree that there are—most of them their own fault, but some of them not—and he talks you into doing something about it, which you don't want to do, and can't do, anyway, not to your own satisfaction, and where does it get you?"

"Into producing a pageant, but where's this leading us?"

"Into these murders, of course. Where did you think I was leading you?"

"I don't know. Carry on, then. Let's have it all."

"Don't rush me, Dog. My mills grind slowly..."

"Well, but do they have to grind so exceedingly small?"

"You wouldn't know it, Dog, but that remark is blasphemous."

"And this from the woman who thought Saint Lawrence was a former parish priest of Brayne?"

"Well, I still don't see why he shouldn't have been," said Kitty, sturdily. "Anyway, back to what I was saying."

"And that was?"

"These rows, Dog. Oh, nothing that could possibly lead to murder, as I've already said, but, well, there were difficulties."

"How, exactly? And what kind of difficulties? Be specific, dear heart."

"Well, there was this row about Falstaff."

"Oh, there was, was there? What was the trouble? Everybody wanted the part?"

"No, that's just it. Nobody wanted the part. They all saw themselves as Romeo, or Henry V, or something. Nobody wanted to be a fat old knight in a basket of stinking washing. Not that the drama club let it stink, of course."

"Why on earth did they fix on *The Merry Wives*, if nobody wanted to play Falstaff?—not that I believe it!"

"It seems there were wheels within wheels."

"There always are, in these local affairs. Be explicit."

"But I am, Dog. I'm telling you as fast as I can. It was only at secondhand I got it, of course. It was all signed, sealed, and settled by the time I came on the scene, so there was nothing on earth I could do about it. So far as I can make out, Mistress Ford and Mistress Page were the trouble. You see, they knew the parts they wanted, so *they* were at the back of this *Merry Wives* business. There doesn't seem much doubt about that."

"They were responsible for the choice of play, were they?"

"Well, I imagine so. You see, they were much too old to play Juliet—and that would only be one of them, anyway. And it takes someone like Dame Edith Evans to get away

with the part of Juliet's nurse. So *Romeo and Juliet* was out of it. As for *Henry V*, well, there again, you see, things sprang a leak."

"As how?"

"Well, these two women, as you could see for yourself, are all of forty summers, and, even if they weren't, only one of them could play Katherine."

"There's the Queen of France."

"If you think one of those two would agree to play the part of the other one's mother...!"

"What about Mistress Quickly?"

"Really, Dog!"

"Well, she gets a marvellous speech anent the death of Falstaff. Anyway, go on about the casting. Did those two pick the men? You seem to think they did."

"You'd have to ask them. Their names are Brenda Gough and Dorothy Collis. The husband Gough doesn't belong to the drama club. The husband Collis had the part of Page."

"I'd better ring them up. What are the Collis initials?"

"P.E."

"Right. Thanks. I'll do both the women before I tackle anything else. I wonder what's the best excuse for trying to get in touch?"

"Ask about joining the club. After all, you live in Kensington some of the time, and that isn't such a long way from Brayne. Oh, and you can spread yourself on how much you admired their acting."

"The recording angel wouldn't like that very much, and, anyway, I don't think I'll suggest that I'd like to join the club. I know these enthusiastic amateurs. Before you know where you are, you find you've paid the subscription and signed on the dotted line, and are let in for shifting the scenery. Never mind, I'll think up some way of obtaining speech with them. Which shall I tackle first?"

"Well, Brenda Gough giggles and Dorothy Collis moans."

"So you pays your money and you takes your choice. I'll have a shot at Mrs. Collis. You get on to her and introduce me."

"As what?"

"A serious student of the drama, of course. Ask her when she will be at liberty, and tell her I've got a wonderful idea for a five-act tragedy in blank verse."

"Oh, Dog! You haven't, have you?"

"No, but I can easily get hold of one, if necessary. Any respectable literary agent must get dozens of the things sent in. Hope springs eternal in a playwright's breast. In any case, I can think out a basic plot while I'm on my way to see her—that's if she'll have me. What does she moan about?"

"You'll know when you get there, Dog. The difficulty would be to tell you what she *doesn't* moan about. Oh, well, if you're set on it, here goes."

Laura listened respectfully to Kitty's professional "telephone voice," and, having heard it, she was not in the least surprised when Kitty replaced the receiver and announced, with a sunny smile, that Mrs. Collis would be delighted to entertain Mrs. Gavin and Mrs. Trevelyan-Twigg to afternoon tea at four o'clock, if that would be convenient.

It proved that Mrs. Collis lived in a pleasant little cul-de-sac not very far from Squire's Acre. She greeted her visitors with enthusiasm, led them into a well-furnished drawing-room and introduced to them her friend Mrs. Gough. Laura was both surprised and delighted. "Two birds with one stone," she signalled to Kitty, in the (except to initiates) almost indecipherable code of Cartaret Training College for Teachers. Kitty raised iconoclastic eyebrows, but this gesture merely increased Laura's determination (as she expressed it later) of batting on a far from sticky wicket.

Tea was brought in by an expansive and semi-capable Mrs. Mopp, and, over the teacups, buttered scones, thin bread-and-butter, jam, fish paste, layer cake, Dundee cake, and chocolate biscuits, conversation flourished. There was

no need of Laura's well-planned schemes for introducing the object of her visit, for Mrs. Gough, passing her cup for a second instalment of tea, remarked,

"Didn't I see you in front with Mrs. Trevelyan-Twigg when we did our scene from Shakespeare?"

"Yes, you did," Laura replied. "Personally, when I'm on the stage (which isn't often), I can't distinguish anybody in the audience at all. How do you manage it?"

"Oh, it's quite easy, especially in the Town Hall. The stage lighting is thoroughly weak, so that it doesn't blind you, and, in any case, I always look out for my husband."

"Oh, yes. Your husband is not a member of the drama club, I believe?"

Mrs. Gough laughed happily. It would be unfair to class it as giggling, Laura thought.

"Trevor? He lives to play golf and to work in the garden. The Muses are not for him, poor man. He has no feeling whatever for the arts. I took him once to a Picasso exhibition, but I had to warn him that I didn't want any funny remarks. He did point out what he insisted on calling Pop-Eye the Sailor, and, of course, the Fish Hat, but we got out of the place without being lynched, which was something, I suppose."

Laura's heart began to warm towards Mrs. Gough. Kitty, she felt, had misrepresented her.

"Talking of lynching," she said, "is there any known reason why the poor little chap who played Falstaff was done in on the night of the pageant?—apart from the alleged horseplay, I mean."

"We've worried and worried about it," said Mrs. Collis. "We've all been given a most horrible time. The police, you know. They now seem to think that, because two of our members have been murdered, the guilty person must be one of us, but, Henry VIII or no Henry VIII, I don't concede *that* for one moment. As for the horseplay, that's nonsense. Nobody in the club would be such a fool."

"I suppose you can't think of anybody from outside who doesn't like the club very much, and who would be glad to know that your members were having a bad time?"

"Yes, there's your husband, Brenda, isn't there?" said Mrs. Collis nastily. "He hates you to come to rehearsals and to hear you read your part. You've often told me about it."

Brenda Gough laughed, but not in her former pleasant fashion.

"Poor old boy!" she said. "Yes, he does kick up a shindy sometimes, but I can't imagine him killing poor little Luton. Besides, if he had, he would have told me long before now. Anyhow, what about your own husband? Didn't he want to do the balcony scene from *Romeo and Juliet*, or something else utterly unsuited to his age and appearance?" At the end of this question came the giggle prophesied by Kitty.

"He wanted to do Henry V before Agincourt, but, anyway, he couldn't, or where would *you* have come in? Of course, as I pointed out to him, it wouldn't have been fair to choose *Henry V* when we have more women than men in the club. All I can say is that I do so wish my advice had been taken and we'd never had anything to do with the wretched pageant. Oh, I'm sorry, Mrs. Trevelyan-Twigg! I'd forgotten for the moment that the thing was your idea."

"Oh, no, it wasn't, you know," protested Kitty. "I mean, it was really wished on me by that daft nephew of mine." ("Anything to keep the peace," she signalled to Laura.)

"What daft nephew?" asked Laura, backing her up.

"Councillor Julian Perse. You've met him, so you must know what a moron he is."

"All the Council are morons," said Mrs. Gough, giggling.

"We all know your husband wasn't elected on to it," said Mrs. Collis. "Still, that wasn't his fault, or yours, I'm sure. And, talking of morons, what about that idiotic Giles Faudrey up at the Hall?"

"Why, what about him?" asked Kitty.

“Don’t you know? I thought it was all over the borough. Oh, but, of course, you don’t live in Brayne, do you? All the same, as you were at the open-air thing in the park at Squire’s Acre, I should have thought you’d have heard rumours about the goings-on. He’s a menace where the local girls are concerned. I wonder the Batty-Faudreys tolerate him.”

“All I know is that Mr. Faudrey came in with a girl—one of your members, actually—I remember her in the pageant—half-way through tea, and took her to sit at table with the Batty-Faudreys and the Mayor and Mayoress,” said Kitty.

“So we heard. We also heard that Mrs. Batty-Faudrey could have killed him for doing it. I mean, he had no right whatever to have made her *and* Caroline so conspicuous.”

“Yes, Caroline *was* a bit conspicuous,” agreed Kitty, “if she’s the girl I’m talking about. Her trousers were so *very* tight and her curves were so *very* glamorous! I’m not surprised Mrs. Batty-Faudrey took a dim view.”

“She took a dimmer one when Caroline had a shot at seducing the Colonel,” said Mrs. Gough, with another outbreak of laughter.

“Good gracious me!” exclaimed Kitty. “Did she really?”

“Yes, indeed. It’s an old story now, I suppose, but it was Teddy Luton’s fault in a way. He did do such idiotic things! Anyway, I shall never forgive him for breaking up our Town Hall show.”

“I should have thought it was his killer who shouldn’t be forgiven,” said Laura, bluntly.

“Oh, well, his killer wasn’t one of our members,” said Mrs. Gough.

“Is that certain?” asked Laura, although she had gathered from her husband that he thought it was.

“Well, it must be, mustn’t it? I mean, ‘the show must go on’ is our motto. None of the members would be dirty enough to break up a performance by fooling about with a sword and killing someone,” protested Mrs. Collis.

"Well, that means murder, then. Can you tell us why anybody should want to murder Falstaff?"

"That's where it doesn't make sense. He was quite harmless," said Mrs. Gough, "except for this genius for putting his foot in things, of course."

"Nobody is harmless," said Mrs. Collis.

"I agree with you," said Laura. I've said it before. Every one of us is a menace to somebody. There's not a soul who wouldn't deserve to be liquidated, for some good reason or other, so, now, what about this Luton? Exactly how did he offend?"

"Well, there was that time when he loosed off an Army rifle instead of bursting a paper bag in the wings as he'd been told to do. Remember?" said Mrs. Gough to Mrs. Collis.

"He always denied it about the rifle," said Mrs. Collis. "He said he was scared of firearms."

"All the same, he couldn't tell us who *had* fired it, could he?"

"You mean he wouldn't, not that he couldn't."

"Oh, nonsense! He wasn't all that public school!"

"Public schools aren't the only places where you don't split on a pal!"

"Oh, I grant you all those delinquent gangs. *They* don't split on one another because they *daren't*."

"Is that so different from the public schools, then? They only don't split because their lives wouldn't be worth living if they did! And, anyway, what about that donkey at the dressage? I bet that was Luton's idea of a joke."

Kitty jumped in where Laura feared to tread.

"This is getting us nowhere," she declared. "That donkey got out of control, that's all. Now, then, what were you saying about this Caroline dim-wit seducing the Colonel?"

Mrs. Gough giggled.

"It happened when the Batty-Faudreys gave a fancy-dress party to celebrate the silver jubilee of the house."

"I thought the house was older than that."

"I mean the silver jubilee of their ownership of it."

"Oh, yes, of course. And was this Caroline invited to the party?"

"In a sort of way. Mrs. Batty-Faudrey wanted a masque—like *Comus*, you know—so, of course, the drama club were asked to do one. Well, the whole thing was rather difficult because, except for *Comus*, nobody knew of any masques, and, somehow, *Comus* seemed unsuitable unless we could alter it quite a bit, which is what we did, and then we combined it with a bit of *Everyman* and a bit of *Midsummer Night's Dream*, you see."

"Good God!" said Laura.

"It wasn't at all bad," said Mrs. Gough, complacently. "Considering that we were only given three weeks' notice, I think the club came up to scratch quite marvellously. Of course, being under-rehearsed, we had to improvise a bit, but as we gave it in the dark, except for a few candles, and to an audience who'd mostly had plenty to drink..."

"Where was it performed, then?" asked Laura. "In the house?"

"Yes, in the hall of Squire's Acre. It's Elizabethan, so there was plenty of room. Well, when the lights went up—which they did rather unexpectedly, owing to Teddy Luton mistaking—or some of us thought perhaps it was done deliberately—mistaking the cue to switch them on—Caroline was found to be sitting on the Colonel's knee. Of course, it was quite suitable, in a way, as the Colonel (we heard afterwards) tried to point out to his wife, because he was dressed as Charles II, but, naturally, Mrs. Batty-Faudrey wasn't having any of that, although she glossed matters over at the time."

"Yes, but we've never been asked to perform there again," said Mrs. Collis. "In fact, until the pageant, none of our members has even been inside the gates and none of

the Batty-Faudreys came to the Town Hall *Merry Wives*, I noticed, not even Giles."

"So when Giles Faudrey came bounding in with Caroline and sat with his uncle and aunt and the Mayor and Mayoress—yes!" said Kitty thoughtfully. "Do you know," she added to Laura, as they left the *cul-de-sac* and made for the side-street where they had left the car, "I don't believe you need look any further for a motive."

"Why?"

"Why? Well, Dog, it's plain enough. You can see what happened."

"Oh? And what did happen?"

"Delayed revenge!"

"Eh?"

"Well, it stands to reason, Dog. The Colonel gets into his wife's bad books because of this Caroline creature, and Giles presenting her at tea-time on the day of the pageant like that—fuel to the fire, as you might say—and then that silly business of the donkey which spoilt the dressage—well, you can see how it all affected the Colonel. He frets and fumes. She—meaning Mrs. Batty-Faudrey—a hard case, Dog, if ever there was one—she spends the long winter evenings brooding upon his little escapade and then reminding him of it. His anger smoulders—and against whom?"

"Don't keep me in suspense! Against whom?"

"Not against his wife. He is honest and he can't help seeing her point of view. Not against Caroline. He is a fair-minded man and he is prepared to admit that she would not have been the party of the second part if he had not been the party of the first part. I refer to the knee-sitting. So now, with whom are we left?"

"*You tell me.*"

"Oh, Dog, you can't be trying! We're left, of course, with the wretched Luton, who gave the game away by turning the lights up at the wrong time. Let us go further."

"I can't wait to do so," said Laura. They reached the car. "I'll drive, shall I?"

Kitty settled herself comfortably, Laura took the wheel, and they drove off towards Brayne high street and the London Road.

"Well, going further," continued Kitty, "this is how I see it. At the time of that masque, Luton is in love with this girl Caroline. He is of a jealous temperament. He feels there is hanky-panky in the air. He knows she is not on-stage, and as, in that hall where the masque was performed, there wouldn't have been any wings, he knows she is not in the wings. Where, therefore, he wonders, has she got to?"

"To the Colonel's armchair and lap?" suggested Laura.

"Quite right, Dog. How he senses this, we do not know, but, his feelings bursting suddenly out at the top of his head, *he turns up the lights* and exposes the guilty couple to the gaze of the many-headed."

"Blimey! You know, you're wasted designing fashions and hair-dos," said Laura. "You ought to be writing about Dracula and Frankenstein and Dr. Who. You make my flesh creep."

"Then there comes," pursued Kitty, "the afternoon of the pageant. The Colonel's nephew brings the means of the Colonel's downfall in to tea, and this, mark you, when poor old Batty-Faudrey is grinding his teeth about that donkey. His mind is made up. Luton is for it. People who turn the lights up at inconvenient times deserve their fate, and so do those who let loose donkeys at the wrong time. Round to the left here, Dog, just beyond the next lights. Don't you think I've hit the nail on the head?"

"The sureness of your aim commands my utmost reverence."

"That means you don't believe in my reconstruction. You'll find I'm about right, all the same."

"So you think Colonel Batty-Faudrey is the murderer? What, then, did you make of Mrs. Collis's remark that none

of the Batty-Faudrey lot came to the Town Hall show?"

"That's an easy one. The Colonel wasn't in the audience, of course, but what about that side-door which opens on to Smith Hill? I've thought a lot about that, since Dame Beatrice inspected the Town Hall."

"Do you think the Batty-Faudreys knew about that door? I shouldn't have thought they'd know more than the front (or official) entrance to the Town Hall, with red carpet laid down, so to speak."

"Still, the side-door is there, Dog, and even a Batty-Faudrey murderer would be a desperate man."

"Desperate enough to get green slime on his shoes when dumping a body in the Thames?"

"He wouldn't worry about his shoes."

"It's no use, Kay. I simply cannot see Colonel Batty-Faudrey as a murderer."

"Well, he's been a soldier, so he must have murdered lots of people in his time."

"Not by stabbing them through the heart, though."

"Why not? The Commandos did."

"Be that as it may, even if the Colonel killed Falstaff for the reason aforesaid, he couldn't have had any reason for killing Henry VIII."

"That's as far as we know, Dog. If Henry VIII had found out about the murder of Falstaff, the Colonel might have killed him to shut his mouth."

"Those two who carted Falstaff off the stage went straight across the road to the pub, you know. Neither of them could have seen the murder committed, if things are as you say."

"Oh, I know that's *supposed* to be their alibi, but alibis are there to be busted. Read any good detective story, and judge for yourself."

"I do. But real life isn't often like that. How would you reconstruct the crime?"

"That's easy. Falstaff is lugged off the stage and helped out of the basket. He's hot and sticky, so he goes into the *Bouquets* room to freshen up."

"What about his make-up? How do you mean—freshen up?"

"Oh, Dog, don't quibble. Who's doing this reconstruction, me or you?"

"I'm only making helpful comments."

"Well, they're not. They simply make me lose the thread, that's all."

"Sorry. He goes into *Bouquets* to freshen up."

"Colonel Batty-Faudrey is lurking."

"In *Bouquets*?"

"No, I shouldn't think so. He couldn't be sure that Falstaff would go in there."

"Where, then?"

"Oh, Dog, does it matter where? He's just simply lurking, that's all. He follows Falstaff into *Bouquets* and stabs him—an easy job for an old soldier. That's just plain common-sense. He leaves the body where it is, and sneaks to the door to make sure the coast is clear. Well, it isn't clear."

"Aha!"

"Henry VIII, in the character of one of the menservants, is doing up a shoelace or buttoning his overcoat or searching his pockets for the price of a pint or something."

"I can see it all!"

"You're not to sneer at me, Dog. I mean this seriously. The other serving man—the one who took the part of Edward III in the pageant—has gone charging on ahead. Well, the Colonel doesn't know whether Henry VIII's suspicions have been aroused or not. He doesn't think they have. He waits for him to go, then he totes the body and the basket down to the Thames and plants them where he hopes the tide will wash them away."

“But why the murder of Henry VIII if he didn’t think his deeds had been observed?”

“They *had* been observed, so Henry VIII began to blackmail him, and needed to be got rid of. That’s the way I see it, anyhow.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The Environs of Brayne

“...a vast and expansive, but shallow lake, on the luxuriantly wooded banks and islands of which wild and ferocious creatures of extraordinary size and character fixed their habitation...”

“So what we collected today, including old Kitty’s moronic reconstruction, doesn’t amount to a hill of beans,” said Laura, when she had rejoined her employer.

“The vegetable *motif* in English metaphors has always intrigued me,” said Dame Beatrice.

“As how?”

“A hill of beans, turnip-headed, sheer mashed potato, a string-bean (as of a man), a bean-pole (as of a woman), spilling the beans, knowing how many beans make five, as like as two peas.”

“Knowing one’s onions, pure apple sauce, ditto (Wodehouse) banana oil,” said Laura. “Likewise, a cauliflower ear, a strawberry nose, playing gooseberry, giving the raspberry, speaking with a plum in one’s mouth, the answer’s a lemon, the girl is a peach, the man is off his onion, and, of course, the outmoded *shucks*, meaning nonsense. One could go on and on, I daresay. But, to resume: Colonel Batty-Faudrey didn’t kill Falstaff, whatever old Kitty may say. If he killed anybody, it would be his wife, I should think, if she kept ribbing him about that girl Caroline. Well, where do we go from here?”

"To Brayne. I want to identify the private road in which Henry VIII's body was found, and I want to talk to Mr. Perse about his coming pageant."

"I suppose Henry VIII's head hasn't turned up yet?"

"With a broad river, its tributary and a canal all within easy reach, the search for the head is likely to be a long one."

"And, of course, may be no good at all. I suppose the body *is* the one we think it is?"

"I do not think there can be much doubt about that. For one thing, it has been identified by three independent witnesses, and, for another, nobody else in the neighbourhood has been reported missing."

"I wonder *how* he was killed. If the identity was so easy to establish, it seems as though we were right when we decided that the beheading was to disguise the means used to do him in, and *not* to cloud the issue of who he was."

"It is more than likely."

"But haven't they discovered any weapons?"

"By which you mean?"

"Well, I thought perhaps something in the nature of either a sharp or a blunt instrument must have finished him off. I'd be inclined to think he was hit over the head, or stabbed in the throat. Then there's the beheading itself. That would need an axe, and that axe would be bloodstained."

"Another interesting speculation: I wonder where the murder took place? The police are certain it was not in that private road where the body was found."

"You mean that if we knew where the deed was done, it might give a pointer towards who did it?"

"Exactly—it *might*."

"Cautious, aren't you? Why do you want to talk to Julian Perse about his beastly pageant?"

"Something might come of it. I am not hopeful, but I think it is worth trying."

"You know, I think we're all going into this with our eyes bandaged. We don't *really* know what the murderer's motive was, there don't seem to be any clues, and, to my mind, it still isn't sufficiently established that the dead Henry VIII *was* Spey. The fact that he's missing might mean that he's the murderer and has hopped it pretty damn' quick."

"I am sure that is a point which did not escape the notice of the police, but they are satisfied that the identity of the corpse has been proved beyond reasonable doubt. At any rate, whatever our speculations, theories, and inferences may be, tomorrow we go to Brayne."

"And spy out the lie of the land and contact Kitty's nit-wit nephew? Looniness must run in that family."

"Together with a certain amount of genius."

"If genius equals a single-track mind, yes, I'd be inclined to agree."

They set out after an early lunch on the following day and reached Brayne at just after four. What had been a Roman road ran through the borough from the bridge across the Thames (connecting Greater London with Surrey) to another, less pretentious, bridge. This one crossed the canal and bordered Brayne and the riverside village which adjoined it on the west.

The high street was a straight and narrow thoroughfare unredeemed from squalor. Small shops, many of them closed and derelict, bordered it on the north side, and on the side which ran by the river were the gasworks, the fire station, the police station, and the hideous Edwardian Town Hall. Odd little scrofulous alleys separated some of the shops, but on the river side only a lane to the ferry and the now notorious Smith Hill led to the Thames.

Half-way between the two bridges a road left the high street at right-angles and, with it, the whole character of the town seemed to change. This road was clean and fairly wide. It led past the Butts, where Kitty's pageant had been assembled, and then made a wide sweep, following the

course of the ancient trackway which had preceded it. At one time it had wound past an Iron-Age camp, the guardian of the only spot for many miles where the Thames could be forded.

It passed on over a railway bridge and then the scene changed again. There were meadows and a farm. Beyond the farm a high brick wall, flanked by enormous elm trees, hid Colonel Batty-Faudrey's policies from view, but some three hundred yards farther on were the wrought-iron gates through which could be glimpsed the Elizabethan mansion Squire's Acre.

Beyond a broad, hedge-bordered lane opposite these gates were market gardens, and further north still, beyond these, was another farmhouse, a long, low building supported by stables on one side of a hollow square and cow-byres on the other. Beyond the farm, incongruously enough, ran a branch of the Underground railway.

The road, still bordered by fields on the side opposite the farmhouse, rose to the railway bridge and dropped gently down to the other side. In a meadow on the left, a solitary oak tree stood in the middle of grassland. At some distance from it, half-a-dozen swings and a see-saw indicated a public recreation ground. In addition, there were park benches and a cricket pitch.

Dame Beatrice's car drove on, and very shortly came to an imposing road-house set back from the thoroughfare so that cars could be parked in front of it. Young Mr. Perse's lodgings were down a turning by the side of the building and proved to consist of two very respectable rooms on the first floor of a semidetached house. The visitors were expected, and Mr. Perse opened the door to them himself.

"Ah, come right in and have a drink," he said, hospitably, "unless you'd prefer a cup of tea."

Dame Beatrice accepted sherry, Laura and the host chose whisky. The object of the visit then came to light.

"I am anxious to see the private road in which Mr. Spey's body was found. Apart from that, I am also keenly interested in this projected pageant of yours. Perhaps you will be kind enough to tell me all about it," said Dame Beatrice.

"There's nothing much to tell. I thought the first one was entirely inadequate. The wrong people, including my aunt, were running it, and some aspects of it were farcical, as was the whole of the Town Hall show. I want to put on a pageant which really does credit to the history of the borough. What's more, I'm not going to give that pernicious and ridiculous drama club any part in it. I am going to use my boys and the High School girls for the whole thing."

"Does the High School know?" enquired Laura shrewdly. Young Mr. Perse smiled.

"Not yet. I conceived the idea too late in the term—in the middle of G.C.E. and all that—to bother them, but I shall write to Miss Empson immediately after the summer holiday. She'll be only too glad to allow her girls to take part. I shall need to hold auditions, of course, and to vet the girls for looks and height and so on, and that will take a good deal of my spare time, as it will all have to be done out of school hours, but I feel it's necessary."

"Your headmaster is aware of your project and approves of it, I imagine?" said Dame Beatrice.

Young Mr. Perse looked down at the drink in his glass. He frowned thoughtfully.

"Actually, neither—yet. But he's bound to think it a thundering good idea. It will be entirely educational, you see, and, in addition, it should put an end, once and for all, to the Cold War."

"What cold war?" enquired Laura; although she could guess the answer to her question and so was not surprised when it came.

"Why, the cold war between our scholastic establishment for the sons of not quite gentlemen and the

High School for Girls, of course.”

“Oh, really?”

“Yes. There was a bit of tension about a year ago on account of the fact that a gang of our nit-wits kidnapped a couple of Fourth Form girls and shut them up in the groundsman’s tool shed, it being his afternoon off. There was no end of a hoo-ha. The girls, who, of course, complained, were brought into our Senior Assembly to identify the culprits. This they failed to do. The school itself stood firmly shoulder to shoulder, so that nothing the Head could think of succeeded in bringing the sinful boys to justice.”

“An unusual state of affairs, surely?”

“I would think so, but, as one would expect, there were wheels within wheels.”

“There always are. What inner wheels in this case?” demanded Laura.

“Well, I happen to be on terms of more than ordinary friendship (as they say) with the junior Maths mistress, and she confided to me that she was fairly certain the kidnapping was a put-up job and had had the full support and connivance of the two girls. It was an odd sort of coincidence, she said, that they should have been kidnapped and locked away on the very afternoon of her end-of-the-year Maths test, Maths being a subject at which they did not shine.”

“Didn’t she make them sit for it next day?” enquired Laura, reminded of her own delinquent youth.

“No. As it happened, the next day the end-of-term inter-House tennis tournament was staged and took all the time there was.”

“They could have missed the tournament for once.”

“That’s just what they couldn’t do. Both were playing for their House, and their housemistress happened to be the formidable Mrs. Golightly (but she doesn’t), the senior Physics mistress. Science women always seem to me to get

it up the nose, and this one is no exception, so poor old Valerie didn't dare chuck her weight about, and keep the blighters out of the tennis, for fear of offending this frightful woman."

"How about after school?"

"Well, the school bus, a decrepit affair run by the local motor-coach people, is the sacred cow of the High School's being, because, for some of the girls, there's no alternative form of transport unless they come on bikes or (in the case of the privileged Sixth Form) in their own cars. So, as it would be manifestly unfair to keep back those kids who *don't* use the school bus, it is an unbreakable rule that *nobody* is ever kept in after school under any circumstances. Even the school clubs and societies and games practices are all held in the dinner hour."

"Oh, I see. No wonder the girls found themselves unable to identify your naughty lads. But why the ill-feeling between the two schools?" asked Laura.

"Bless you, there's no ill-feeling between the two schools; it's just between the two Heads, whose senior Staff, of course, feel bound to back them up. The High School lady accuses our Old Man of lax discipline, and the Old Man avers that her sexy little madams lead our pure young boys astray."

"And you really think your pageant will effect a reconciliation? I shouldn't like to bank on it," said Laura.

"Oh, well, be that as it may," said young Mr. Perse, airily brushing aside criticism, "what about going and having a look at the spot where the body was found? The simplest, quickest, and nicest way from here is to walk along the towing-path. It's only about a mile, and quite easy going at this time of year. I'll give your man directions where to pick you up, shall I?"

A lane bordered by trees and a hawthorn hedge led by the side of the public park to a river in which children were bathing. The party, led by Perse, walked along its bank until

they came to an iron bridge where the river, at a sharp bend, flowed into the canal. The towing-path was broad and the going was firm. On the water's edge there were meadow-sweet and purple loosestrife, and on the side next to the park were herb robert, common St. John's wort, bush vetch, silverweed, and knotgrass. Quite a country scene, as Laura remarked.

A stroll of just over a quarter of a mile brought the party to a very high, stone-built, narrow, iron-railed bridge, where the towing-path came to an end on the north bank and continued on the opposite side of the canal. An overgrown but obvious path continued, however, along the north bank, and a tiny, rather spiritless weir carried some of the water alongside it. Laura stood and gazed. The overgrown lane looked far more attractive, she thought, than the towing-path they were about to follow on the opposite side of the canal.

"That bit of the stream runs past the lower end of Squire's Acre, the wooded part," explained Perse, halting by Laura and following her gaze. "Squire's Arm they call it. It's got a bend half-way along it, rather the shape of a slightly-bent elbow, if you're fanciful. It's no good going that way if you want to get back into Brayne, though. It joins the canal again, further on, it's true, but there's no way of getting back to the towing-path because there isn't another bridge, so you have to retrace your steps."

"Is that overgrown path on Batty-Faudrey land? Is it private, I mean?"

"If it is, they don't bother about it any longer. The Batty-Faudrey woods are railed off against kids because some of them play along the path and pick the wild irises and the dog-roses. It's true that there is an old picture in Brayne library showing a broad ride down through Squire's Acre woods to a wooden footbridge, and there's a stretch of open ground on the opposite side of the river with just a few oak

trees and an elm or two. This seems to show that the estate was a lot bigger before the canal was cut than it is now."

"Talking of oaks," said Laura, as they crossed the towing-path bridge, "why on earth don't the Council take down that tree which stands bang in the middle of the public park? It must get horribly in the way when you're fielding at cricket."

"Take down the Sacred Oak?—or Hangman's Oak, as some call it? My darling Auntie Laura, it's more than our lives would be worth. We'd all be slung out, lock, stock, and barrel, at the next Council election! The thing's holy! Besides, I need it for my pageant."

"I thought your pageant was going to be held in the Town Hall."

"So it is, some of it, but before that we're going to do our Hocking and then dance round the oak to the music, played on recorders, of *Mage on a Cree*."

"You mean *Sellenger's Round*, a dance obviously intended to be offered to a sacred tree," said Laura.

"Yes, but the other's a better tune. Anyway, I can think that over later."

The narrow road-bridge which carried Brayne high street over the canal was reached a short time later. They crossed the high street opposite a small public house called *The Faudrey Arms* and a walk of five minutes' duration brought them to the private road they sought. It was bordered on one side by a house with a brick-walled garden and on the other side there was another and a higher brick wall. The road was not gated and was wide enough to take a large car. It was only about sixty yards long and did not lead directly to the ducal mansion, but to a kissing-gate which, in its turn, gave on to a public footpath leading down to the Thames.

"Well, that's your lot," said Julian Perse. "It's no good asking me exactly where the body was found—the spot marked with a cross, I mean—because I don't know."

"It is immaterial," said Dame Beatrice. "One may assume, I think, that the body was brought along the high street and not out from the ducal mansion. It would be helpful to know where the murder took place and where the head is hidden. However, as the police, with all their resources, have so far failed to discover these things, it is in the highest degree unlikely that we shall succeed. Still, it is a pleasant evening and quite early, and our time is our own. I should wish to continue our walk. Where did you instruct George to meet us?"

A respectful note on a horn saved Mr. Perse from answering this pertinent question. George was backing the car towards them along the narrow road. He pulled up alongside and got out.

"Ah, George," said Dame Beatrice, "we are enjoying our walk and propose to extend it. Mr. Perse will tell you where to wait for us."

"Very good, madam."

"Turn left at the top of this road, then left again at the traffic lights and keep straight on until you get to the river. Turn right and you'll see a biggish pub called *More Fish in the Sea*. We shall call in there for a drink and then you can pick up the ladies and go home. All right?" said Mr. Perse.

"Very good, sir." The stocky, stolid, eminently respectable chauffeur climbed back into the driver's seat and started up the car. Mr. Perse held the kissing-gate open for the ladies and Dame Beatrice and Laura, followed by the young man, threaded their way through it and found themselves on a gravel path fenced on both sides by iron railings. There were trees, and some cows were grazing behind the railings. A little further on there was a large, shallow lake.

"Freezes over very readily in sharp weather," said Julian. "People come from all over the place to get some free skating. Otherwise, the park, as you see, is kept inviolate. You can, however, on payment of half-a-crown, enter and

view the mansion and use the woods behind it for picnics. It's one of our nicest school outings and well worth while, in other ways, too—history and so forth, I mean. Henry V founded a convent here and, when it was dissolved, all sorts of important people came along. At different times it housed Catherine Howard as a prisoner before her execution, and also Lady Jane Grey, who was living here at the time when she accepted the crown. Charles I visited his children here, when he was a prisoner at Hampton Court, and Queen Anne made it her home before she came to the throne. The interior is a magnificent job by Adam, and Capability Brown did the landscaping. Then there are fine portraits and period furniture..."

"And once," said Laura, "the body of Henry VIII. The real one, I mean."

"These murders are very odd," said Julian, side-tracked, from his own point of view, but brought back on to the highroad, in Laura's estimation. "I am very glad you have interested yourself in the matter, Dame Beatrice. I suppose you don't want a working partner?"

"You're already on the strength, showing us round like this," said Laura. "Besides—"

"Yes?" said Julian hopefully. Laura scowled thoughtfully at a cow which, not satisfied with the lush riverside pastures which stretched for acres all around it, had put its head through the iron railings and was eating the drier, inferior grass which bordered the gravel path.

"It's something you've said since we met you today," she said. "There's a bell ringing somewhere, but, so far, I haven't been able to place it. It will come back, I suppose. I hope so, anyway, because it's so loud and clear that it's definitely shouting in my ear. Most frustrating and annoying."

"Perhaps Dame Beatrice heard it, too."

"She may have done, but, somehow, I have a kind of sort of feeling that she didn't, and *why* she didn't I can't

think, but there it is. I'd better put it right out of my mind and then it will come back of its own accord, I hope."

The gravel path ended at a tall, wrought-iron gate and they found themselves on a bus-route. Another road, quiet and, apparently, little used by motor traffic, debouched from this and led gently downhill past some hospital buildings and, in ironic and grim juxtaposition, a cemetery. About half a mile further on was the river, and the quiet road, making a right-angle bend past an eighteenth-century church, led to the public house mentioned by Julian. George had the car drawn up outside it. They went inside for a drink and then Dame Beatrice insisted upon giving Julian a lift back to his rooms. She and Laura declined his invitation to go in, and soon they were on their way towards Dame Beatrice's Kensington house, where they had planned to stay the night before going back to the New Forest and the Stone House at Wandles Parva.

Laura was remarkably silent during the drive. Dame Beatrice glanced at her once or twice, but said nothing and left her to her thoughts.

"It's no good," said Laura, at last. "I ought to let it rest and wait for it to come back of its own accord, but I just keep chewing it over in the way one can't leave an aching tooth alone. All the same, try as I will, I'm getting nowhere, so I'll change the subject. As Henri and Celestine are both at the Stone House, how and where are we going to eat? It's getting late and I'm absolutely starving."

"Our dear Mrs. Trevelyan-Twigg has invited us to dine with her, and she will also feed George."

Kitty was delighted to welcome them. They were given sherry and an excellent dinner, and then Kitty asked whether their outing had been satisfactory. Laura gave her an account of it and suddenly, in her own expression, the penny dropped as she was describing the walk along the canal.

“So then we came to this steep, high, narrow bridge, where the towing-path changed sides,” she said. “There was a much nicer path which ran past the Batty-Faudrey woods, but Julian said it didn’t lead anywhere. It’s called Squire’s Arm...” She broke off. “Good Lord!” she exclaimed. “That’s it! That must be it!”

CHAPTER TWELVE

Head Tucked Underneath His Arm

“From that stately mansion and the beautifully wooded and verdant surroundings...we will now pass once more to the extreme...boundary which we shall make the starting place for a ramble to some of the most interesting scenes in the old County town.”

Dame Beatrice gazed at her secretary with mild interest, Kitty with deep concern.

“Do you feel all right, Dog?” she enquired.

“Very much all right,” replied her friend. “Something that’s been nagging at me for hours has suddenly fallen into place. Let’s forget it. It will keep. Stick some Bach on, and let Mrs. Croc. enjoy herself. We’ve had a tiring although fascinating day.”

“Well,” said Dame Beatrice, when they reached the Stone House in mid-afternoon of the following day, “you have said nothing so far of your satisfying discovery. Am I to share in your raptures? I noticed that you did nothing to allay the obvious curiosity of Mrs. Trevelyan-Twigg.”

“Old Kitty babbles. She probably doesn’t intend to, but what goes in at the shell-like ears is apt to come out through the ruby lips.”

“Dear me! You are most expressive; impressive, too. What *can* you have discovered?”

"Nothing, as yet. Just a hunch, and I must do something about it before I hand it over to the police. In other words, we've got to go back to Brayne; at least, I must. No need for you to come. In fact, I'd much rather you didn't. If I'm on the wrong tack, I'd rather feel a fool on my own."

"I quite understand. What is more, I think that your theory is reasonable, considering all the circumstances which, so far, have come to our knowledge."

"You must be *clairvoyante*," said Laura. "How did you guess what I've been thinking?"

"I know the way your mind works."

"That's the worst of living with a psychiatrist. I can't keep any secrets. What makes you think my hunch is reasonable? I didn't tell you what it was because I thought you'd hoot with ill-considered mirth, and that would have discouraged me."

"These murders have followed a bizarre pattern, therefore no theory about them, however seemingly far-fetched, can be laughed out of court or disregarded. As for discouraging you, I would not dream of it."

"Many thanks. So you don't mind if I go out prospecting on my own?"

"So far as I am concerned, you have a free hand. When do you propose to return to Brayne?"

"Tomorrow, starting more or less at the crack of dawn, if you don't mind. I may need all day for the search, you see. I'll go in my own car and take sandwiches and a thermos. That way I won't have to waste time getting a lunch somewhere. Good thing the weather keeps fine."

She set off on the following morning not quite at the crack of dawn but by nine o'clock. In the boot of the car were a garden rake, a light spade, a piece of clean sacking, a trowel, and a tin of carbolic powder. Laura was not at all certain that she would be able to find a use for any of these, or that she would press them into service even if she did

find a use for them, but they seemed to lend interest and colour to the expedition.

As far as Southampton the road was fairly clear of traffic and, later, she made excellent time on the Winchester bypass, so that it was just before noon when she reached Brayne. She parked the car in front of the road-house, went in for a beer, and asked whether she might leave the car for a couple of hours while she attended to important business. The barman said that he couldn't care less, half-a-crown was passed over the bar counter and Laura, shouldering the rake, crossed the road and took the path which led down to the canalised little river. Careful prospecting was necessary, she decided, before excavation was possible.

There were schoolchildren on holiday, people exercising dogs, older people resting on the park benches, and, when she reached the river, boys bathing. She took the path to the bridge where the river and its canalised stretch joined forces, followed the towing-path and soon came to the steep bridge which carried the towing-path over the canal.

She kept straight on into Batty-Faudrey country, first alongside the trickling little weir and then by the side of the river. Her plan was to follow the path rapidly to its end and then scrutinise it closely on her return to the weir. To her relief, there were no children either swimming in the river or playing on the bank. The river, shallow and weedy in this stretch, was not attractive to youngsters, she supposed. The bank, however, was luxuriant with tall grasses and rose-bay willow herb. There were hawthorn and wild rose bushes, besides wild clematis, hedge parsley, and clumps of stinging-nettles. Farther on, both banks were tree-lined, and, as well as the spears of the yellow iris, by this time long past flowering, knotted figwort was growing beside the water.

Almost immediately Laura found herself skirting the Batty-Faudrey woods of Squire's Acre. The trees were elms, lime trees, horse-chestnuts, holly, and oaks, and, although

not densely congregated, they effectively hid the house, for they grew on a very considerable slope which terminated at the river bank. Laura walked on and, just before she came to the end of the Squire's Acre estate, the river rejoined the canal.

She stood for a few moments to look at the confluence and then turned to retrace her steps. The first thing in particular that she noticed was a tall gate set in the iron railings which bordered the estate. It was padlocked, but a little farther on somebody had managed to wrench apart two of the uprights of the iron railings to make an aperture through which a slim, agile body could force its way up into the woods. Boys, thought Laura. She wondered whether the Colonel knew that his estate was open to trespassers; however, it was no business of hers.

She quartered and raked the ground systematically in search of clues. She was looking for a spot where the soil had been disturbed.

She spent a full hour and a half in diligent search, but found nothing to arouse her suspicions, so she tied a bit of string to the Batty-Faudrey railings to mark the limit of her progress and then returned to the weir to eat the sandwiches and fruit and to drink the coffee she had brought with her. Then she smoked a cigarette, tossed the stub of it into the water, and returned to her self-imposed task.

She had carefully worked over another few square yards of the riverside when she was aware of voices—very youthful voices.

"Damn!" muttered Laura. "Hope they're not coming this way."

But that, it appeared, was exactly what they were doing. They soon hove in sight, three little boys aged about eight or nine, armed with jam jars and fishing nets and intent upon minnows and sticklebacks. They pulled up when they saw Laura. She smiled at them. If they were going to

fish for tiddlers, she surmised, they were not likely to concern themselves with her own activities. They did not return the smile, but passed her in single file and were lost to sight among the bushes which bordered the river bank.

She waited for a minute or so, and then resumed her careful, plodding, and rather tiring work. She could hear the shrill chattering and wrangling of the children, but could not distinguish what they said. She was not particularly interested, in any case, but concentrated upon the job in hand until there was an interruption. Running along the rough path came two of the small boys. They pulled up about three yards away from her.

"I say, missus," gasped one of them, "give us a lend of your rake."

Laura suspended operations.

"What for?" she asked.

"We found some treasure, missus. It's in the water in the weeds and us can't get it up."

"It's ever so 'eavy," said the second child. "It might be money."

"I'd better come along and help," said Laura, "but I shouldn't think it's money. More likely to be some old iron. Where's the other boy?"

"He's watching the spot, so we won't lose the place. He's in the water, standin' up."

"Can he swim?" asked Laura, relieved to know that the Third Musketeer was still vertical.

"No, none of us can't swim, not yet."

"All right. Come on, then." The boys trotted before her, and she followed with long strides. When they reached the spot where the third child was standing up to his thighs in the water, she said again, "I shouldn't think it's money, you know."

"Might be gold cups and a crown and that," said the boy who had asked for the rake. "Our teacher told us as how a king watched a battle from here. He might have chucked a

lot of stuff in the river, thinking to get it later on, when the battle was finished and the enemy was all lying dead.”

“Like pirates,” suggested the second boy.

“Or there was King John in the Wash,” put in the first boy, who seemed to have been an attentive pupil.

“Where is it, exactly?” called Laura to the guardian of the treasure.

“Here!” called back the third child, drawing a small foot out of the ooze and splashing himself as he vigorously lowered it again. “I’m nearly standin’ on it.”

Laura sat down on the bank, removed shoes and socks and took off her skirt. Under it, as she had foreseen that she might have to paddle, she had taken the precaution of wearing a tennis dress whose top had acted also as a shirt. Rake in hand, she stepped down into the water, doing no good to the tennis dress, for the bank was fairly steep and she slid down it rather than walked.

The bottom of the river was slimy and her feet sank several inches into the ooze. She joined the small boy.

“O.K.,” she said. “Move over. I don’t want to get your toes with this rake.”

There was certainly some foreign body in the water near where the child had been standing. He was so wet and so muddy that she concluded he had been trying to obtain possession of the object (whatever it was) by bending down and struggling to lift it. Poking about with the rake, Laura soon decided that the “treasure” was certainly neither a chunk of old iron nor (another guess of hers) an old tin can weighted with stones. She handed the rake to the child and stooped down. She could see nothing except the muddy water, for her feet had stirred up the ooze, so she plunged a sleeveless arm into the slime and made contact with, and jerked to the surface, a heavy, foul-looking bag roughly made from what seemed to be sailcloth.

“Got it!” she thought; and wondered how to square the excited children. She took the rake from the third boy and

splashed her way to the bank. The other boys, who had been watching and cheering, clutched eagerly at the treasure. Laura let them have it, confident that their small fingers would never be able to deal with the tarry twine and the length of fine wire with which the top of the bag was very securely fastened.

She was not mistaken. The third child scrambled up the bank to join the others, and in turn the three tried valiantly to cope with the recalcitrant fastenings. In the end they handed the heavy bundle over to Laura.

"Can *you* undo it for us, missus?"

"No, I'm not going to tear my fingers to bits," replied Laura. "Besides, anything found like this has to go to the police."

"Cor! What, the ruddy coppers?"

"Why, you're not afraid of them, are you?"

"No, course not. But they always finks you're up to somefink. My big brother told me."

"They won't think you're up to something if you go with me. I know the Inspector. He's a friend of my husband's. Look here, I've got my car back there at the pub. Why not let me run you down to the police station?"

"My mum said not to go in strange cars," said the first boy.

"Mine never," said he who had been in the river.

"Besides, there's free of us. I bet she only meant if you was on your own."

"Well, p'raps she did." He hesitated, looked longingly at the foul and dirty bundle which had been dredged up, and then capitulated. "All right, then, seein' there's free of us. I reckon," he added to Laura, "as free of us could settle your 'ash, missus, if you tried any funny stuff, couldn't we?"

"I'm sure you could," said the Amazonian Laura gravely. "Come on, then. Let's go."

"If it *is* treasure, will the coppers let us keep it?" asked the second boy, as he trotted to keep pace with Laura's long

strides.

"We shall have to see," she replied. "But it may not be treasure, you know. We can't tell until we get the bag open."

"My dad could open it, easy."

"Yes, but if he did—well, *you* wouldn't get into trouble with the police, but *he* might."

This seemed to dispose of the matter. When they reached the public house, Laura slung her rake and haversack into the boot of the car, lowered the bundle on to the floor and went into the bar. She returned with soft drinks for the boys, whose taste in these matters she had ascertained, and a glass of beer for herself. They sat on the bench outside and refreshed themselves, then Laura reclaimed her car and drove to Brayne high street and the police station. The boys declined to go inside, so she took the malodorous bundle and asked to see the Inspector. He came out, greeted her with polite astonishment, and invited her into his office.

Laura took the chair he offered and told her story, giving her reason for searching the bank of the little river.

"Oh, well, we'll soon see whether you're right, Mrs. Gavin," he said, when she had finished. He left her and went into an inner room with the bundle. It was some time before he returned. When he did, he nodded to her and said briefly,

"Well, it's a head, all right, well weighted down with lumps of stone. We'll have to get it identified, but, personally, I don't think there can be any doubt."

"What can I tell the small boys?" Laura demanded.

"Well, not the truth, of course."

"Suppose I said it's a bit of statuary stolen at some time from Squire's Acre and dumped by the thief because it was too heavy for him to cart away?"

"Fine. That ought to satisfy 'em. Anyway, much obliged, Mrs. Gavin. I'll ask your husband to let you know how we get on. I'm in hopes that if the thing turns out to be what we

think it is, the doctors will be able to tell us the cause of death, which was *not*, I'm dead certain, by beheading."

Laura returned to the small boys, who were seated hopefully on the steps of the police station. She looked solemn, and shook her head sadly.

"Ain't it treasure, then, missus?"

"Not the kind you thought."

"What kind, then? Ain't it valuable at all?"

"That remains to be seen." She repeated the fiction she had outlined to the Inspector. Then she added, "Anyway, the police are pleased to have it, and I am to give you half-a-crown each for finding it. The Inspector says you're three very smart lads."

"If it belongs to Old Batsy, will 'e give the coppers anythink for giving it back to 'im?" asked one child.

"I don't think so. It's their duty to return stolen property," said Laura, deducing, from the use of his nickname, that Colonel Batty-Faudrey was not the most popular landowner in the district. She drove the boys back to the recreation ground, where she parted from them on excellent terms, and then returned to Dame Beatrice, who professed herself enthralled by the tale of (in Laura's words) the hunch that had paid dividends.

"The police don't think there's any doubt about whose head it is," Laura added. "I'm thankful I didn't have to see it, though. The Inspector has gentlemanly instincts and dealt with the bundle out of my sight."

"I am glad of that. Horrid sights have a way of remaining in the mind's eye. I wonder how Mr. Perse is getting on with the preparations for his pageant?"

They soon knew. On the following morning Laura received a letter. Might Julian send along his ideas for the pageant to Aunt Laura? His aunt had told him that she—might he go on calling her simply Laura?—that she was an authority on Eng. Lit., and therefore he would be eternally grateful if she would not mind just glancing over the beastly

thing and giving it her O.K. (or not, as the case might be) and if she thought it foul beyond words, could she—*would* she—offer some constructive criticisms? Julian was sorry if he was being a nuisance, but, etc., etc.

“Oh, *Lord!*” said Laura, dismayed. She handed the epistle to Dame Beatrice. “He doesn’t really want criticism, constructive or otherwise; he wants me to tell him how wonderfully clever he is, and I suppose I’ll have to do it. I can’t throw the poor youth down, whatever his stuff is like—and I don’t mind betting it’s gosh-awful.”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The Second Pageant, Part One

“We must now turn to the records of more recent events and devote a little space to the remarkable proceedings...in the town.”

When Laura read Mr. Perse’s manuscript—or, rather, typescript—she was constrained to admit that his ideas were anything but gosh-awful. The young man, in fact, had made a lively and intelligent plan for his projected pageant, and Laura was considerably impressed by it and rang up Kitty to say so.

There was only one fly in her nephew’s ointment, Kitty replied. All the parts were to be taken by schoolboys. The girls’ school, mindful of the recent feud, had declined to allow itself to be involved.

“He’ll be much better off with a complete cast of boys,” said Laura to Dame Beatrice, reporting the telephone conversation. “For one thing, there won’t be any nonsense of the wrong sort, and, for another, there is no doubt that, called on to impersonate girls, apart from a mad determination to pad their chests until they look like double-fronted pouter pigeons, boys make up better as girls than girls do as boys. Don’t you agree?”

Dame Beatrice, who had always thought growing boys, apart from an unfortunate tendency towards spottiness, were infinitely more attractive than growing girls, agreed wholeheartedly and wondered aloud how soon Mr. Perse

would be able to stage his pageant. This proved to be during the week of the school's half-term holiday at the end of October.

"Hope it keeps fine for him," said Laura, when she was given the date. "Personally, I'd think twice about putting on an open-air show at that time of year."

"Not all of it is to be given out-of-doors, though, is it?" Dame Beatrice enquired.

"Well, quite enough of it to make a fiasco if the weather turns really wet. There's a good deal of actual ground to be covered," Laura explained. "He's doing the Roman bit—Aulus Plautius and company—at the end of Ferry Lane. They're supposed to have landed there, having crossed the river with elephants on board."

"Surely Mr. Perse is not proposing to introduce elephants?"

"Well, if he isn't, it's not for want of trying. Kitty tells me that he got in touch with a circus, but I expect they would want a lot more money than he'd be prepared to pay. He's leaving out Offa of Mercia—which is a pity—and also the Danes, the first because he doesn't think Offa's activities in Brayne were sufficiently dramatic to interest his boys, and the Danes because he thinks the said boys might be a bit too enthusiastic in ravaging the town."

"It sounds as though he has given up the thought of having the boys to dance round the sacred oak. That would have to come before the Romans, I think."

"Yes, it would, and he has. The school captain led a deputation."

"Really? To object to the revels?"

"Well, honestly, I can't say I blame the boys. It's different if you belong to the Folk Song and Dance Society, but, if you don't, to dance *Sellenger's Round* or *Mage on a Cree* round an oak tree for the benefit of the local jobs is something quite other, so he's starting at the ferry and then

the whole procession, on foot, is going to Squire's Acre to enact a chunk of Domesday Book."

"It is very good of the Colonel to lend his grounds once more."

"He didn't really want to, so Kitty tells me, but he's not very popular in Brayne and he didn't want any adverse comment in the school magazine or the local paper, and I understand that Julian Perse, who never seems averse to sticking his neck out, rather threatened him with both if he wouldn't play ball. Squire's Acre was part of the original Manor of Brayne, you see, so Julian felt strongly that the Batty-Faudreys must lend it."

"I see. And is the populace to be admitted?"

"No. Only the friends and relations of the boys taking part. That was the stipulation, and Julian made no objection. He told Kitty that the Domesday Book must be included, as Brayne is actually mentioned in it, but that the episode would be far too dull to appeal to the general public. I agree with him. Personally, I couldn't care less about hides and carucates and virgates, or how many ploughs make five."

"And does that end the open-air part of the proceedings?"

"Yes, for the morning. In the afternoon he takes his boys to the Town Hall for the next bit of history. He wanted to use *The Hat With Feather*, because that's where the event is supposed to have taken place—in an earlier building, of course, but on the same site—but his headmaster and the hotel manager joined forces in turning the project down. The headmaster refused to allow his boys to enter licenced premises, and the manager thought the said licence might be jeopardised if they did."

"And this particular act?—a Chapter of the Garter held in 1445 by the sixth Henry, one surmises."

"Quite correct, and I gather that Julian has very much gone to town on the costumes. Oh, and he had an

anonymous letter about the sacred oak. He's sure it came from some of the boys—Middle School, he thinks."

"I venture to guess the contents."

"And I wouldn't be surprised if you were right. Yes, they said they were sorry the Head Boy had felt obliged to turn down the idea of the dancing because they understood that the tree had also been used as a gallows..."

"And they saw no objection to hanging one of the masters on it, I presume?"

"Yes. Saucy little devils! They did not specify which master, though. Rather restrained of them, I thought. Well, there's a lot more to take place in the Town Hall, of course, but, in the early evening, directly after tea, comes Julian's real masterpiece. He's going to stage an eighteenth-century election in the market square at the canal end of the Butts—hustings, horseplay, torches—everything to be included except the beer."

"That should take some stage-managing. Are you proposing to go along and take part in the revels?"

"Well, if you could spare me, I'd rather like to go, if only in support of old Kitty, whose family feeling impels her to make one of the party, highly though she disapproves of the whole project. She says it's asking for a spot of mayhem, and I don't mind betting she's right."

"Go, by all means. I shall await with interest your account of the affair."

Laura set out for Brayne with mixed feelings. She was interested to see whether young Mr. Perse's pageant was as good as his script, and she wondered whether it would serve to throw any fresh light on the aftermath of Kitty's own attempts to illuminate the history of Brayne. On the other hand, she had a superstitious dread that tragedy might stalk in the wake of the second pageant as it had done during and after the first.

Kitty, dressed with her usual combination of "good taste slightly emphasised" (in Laura's own words), and a

particularly noticeable hat and accessories, met her, by arrangement, at Julian's lodgings. The young man himself opened the door and Kitty's voice floated towards them from his sitting-room.

"That you, Dog?"

"Here, in all my glory."

"Come right in. Julian," explained Kitty, when Laura presented herself, "has to push off in about ten minutes' time to round up his squad, so we'll drink his sherry until it's time to start. He says we'd better walk. Do you mind?"

"If we're going to drink his sherry, it might be as well if we *do* walk. How are you feeling, Julian?"

"That death would be preferable to running this pageant."

Kitty blenched.

"Don't use that word," she said.

"Beg pardon. Just an expression. Aunt Kay, dear, why not remove that expensive-looking lid? You don't need to start for at least three-quarters of an hour. I've got to get to school and pile my jobs into motor-coaches and then we've got to sort ourselves out at the end of Ferry Lane before we can do our stuff."

"This hat," said Kitty, "is on *right*, and I'm not going to touch it. *You* ought to wear a hat, Dog. Why don't you?"

"Wouldn't be seen dead in one," said Laura.

Kitty recoiled.

"*Do* you mind?" she asked faintly.

"Eh? Oh—I see. Sorry, and all that. Just slipped out. A manner of speaking, that's all."

"Well," said Julian, "I'm off. See you later, if I survive."

"Julian and I seem fated to lacerate your feelings," Laura remarked. "Cheer up, old soul. Nothing else is going to happen."

"There's still Edward III at large, Dog. I wish I'd never promised Julian I'd come along today. Oh, well, we may as well drink to his success."

To reach Ferry Lane they took the road to the Half Acre and then turned left along the high street. They passed the Town Hall and the police station and turned down by the fire station after they had crossed the road.

Ferry Lane was a narrow, cobbled thoroughfare which boasted ("thank goodness," said Kitty, conscious of high-heeled, expensive, fashionable shoes) a narrow pavement on the left-hand side of the way. Kitty leading, she and Laura walked in single file towards the river, and were approaching the final bend in the lane when a sudden, unexpected sound rent the air and was followed by cheering, whistling and other excited and approving noises.

"Good heavens!" cried Kitty, stopping so dead in her tracks that Laura nearly fell over her. "He's done it, after all!"

"Good old Aulus Plautius!" said Laura. "I'm all for an elephant or two."

"But we'll be trampled to death in this narrow lane! Come on, Dog! I'm going back!"

"They won't come up here," said Laura. "Anyway, you go back, if you like, but I'm going to march breastforward. Anyway, you've scotched the hoodoo. You've used the ghost-word yourself."

"Yes, but I meant what I said. People *can* be trampled to death in crowds, and by elephants, too. Suppose they get scared at the noise and go berserk or become rogues or something!"

"They won't. I bet they're from that circus which has its headquarters a few miles up the river. They'll be as tame as Angora rabbits."

"Well, all right, if you say so, but at the first sign of danger I shall flee for my life."

Laura took the lead and they rounded the bend. There was not a large concourse assembled. The largest crowd was on the opposite bank of the river. On the nearside, surrounding an obelisk of marble raised on a concrete

plinth, was a comparatively orderly array of schoolchildren, marshalled by their teachers, among whom Kitty recognised Gordon. They had been drawn up in neat lines on a broad stone quay, the property of the Lower Thames-side Coal, Coke, and General Fuel Company. Around the plinth on which the obelisk stood were a couple of dozen boys dressed as Roman legionaries, while on the plinth itself, with one arm around the unyielding waist of the obelisk to keep him from falling off the narrow ledge, stood a tall boy in the full regalia of a Roman general. His standard-bearer, with lion headdress complete, stood just below him, holding the Imperial eagle. At a distance of some twenty yards cowered a bevy of Ancient Britons and, safely away from all humans except their keepers, were a couple of circus elephants. The Roman general was declaiming in Latin.

"It's jolly well done," commented Laura to Kitty. "Pity more people wouldn't come along to see it."

"Too early in the day, Dog. The mums will be shopping and the dads will be at work. You'll get your fill of crowds at the free-for-all this evening, I expect. Well, I've done what you wanted, so, for goodness' sake, let's go. We can wait in the high street to see them pass, if you like, but I'm not staying here any longer."

"I suppose they walked the elephants along the towing-path and over the bridge," remarked Laura, as they retraced their steps, Kitty again in the lead. "They'd hardly have got them to stroll across the river. The channel is dredged in these degenerate days, so I suppose the ford simply isn't there any more."

"I didn't see Julian in the crowd," said Kitty, over her shoulder.

"He was Aulus Plautius, I expect," said Laura. "He could never have got a boy to learn all that Latin in the time."

"Oh, rot, Dog! And that's my answer to both those corny ideas. I expect he's left the Romans to Mr. Thingummy—him I *did* spot in the offing—and is up at Squire's Acre

superintending the Domesday Book stuff. I wonder what Gordon feels like, having to bring his class to another pageant? A bit grim, I should think, wouldn't you?"

"I wish I had a chance of getting inside the Hall," said Laura, wistfully. "I'm certain that's where lies the evidence."

"What evidence, Dog?"

"Somewhere among the Colonel's armoury, dear heart, lies the answer to Falstaff's death."

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The Second Pageant, Part Two

“...lives were lost, property destroyed, and ruffianism went rampant for days in succession... The hustings were erected in a large open space on ‘a piece of ground’ near the road, ‘called the Half Acre’: and we may safely fix the site on the higher part of the Butts...”

The Domesday Survey for the Manor of Brayne (“the Abbot of Saint Peter’s holds Brayne”) turned out to be as uninspiring as Julian Perse had expected. When the episode—mercifully brief—was over, Colonel Batty-Faudrey invited Kitty, Laura, and Julian to go into the house for coffee. This was served in the morning-room, however, and Laura could think of no way of getting herself invited to look at the armoury housed in the long gallery. She consoled herself with the thought that, in any case, there would have been no time to make a detailed inspection, so she enjoyed the coffee, made herself pleasant to her host and hostess, exchanged mild *badinage* with Giles Faudrey (between whom and Julian there appeared to be a wary kind of give and take which reminded Laura of two boxers testing each other’s potentialities in the first round or so of a ten round contest) and, at the end of half an hour, she left with the others.

Julian, whose boys had returned to school in the motor-coaches provided, followed them in order to make certain

that all was ready for the afternoon programme. Laura and Kitty lunched at *The Hat With Feather* and discussed the Batty-Faudreys and the first two items of Julian's pageant.

"Rather a frost, so far," said Laura. "The Romans were all right, but Domesday Book was like I'd always thought it would be. Incidentally, there doesn't seem to be much support from the rest of the school."

"Well, it's half-term-holiday Tuesday," Kitty explained, "so you couldn't expect much interest from the masters and boys. It's good of Mr. Thingummy to turn up and help. Julian did tell me his name, but I can't remember it because I always mix up Tomkinson and Hepplewhite, and I know it isn't either of those—anyway, he's hankering after a headship, so, if there's any chance of appearing in public and catching a useful eye, of course he's all for it."

"What's going to happen at this Chapter of the Garter business this afternoon?"

"Goodness knows, Dog. I'm not going to it."

"Not going to it? Why not?"

"It's to be held in the Town Hall, and wild horses wouldn't drag me there to see another show."

"I call that morbid. A dozen shows must have been put on there since *The Merry Wives*. You disappoint me."

"Well, *you* go, and I'll put in time in Julian's rooms. We're having tea with him there, in any case, so, when you've had your fill of the Town Hall, come along and join me. You don't need a ticket to get into the Town Hall, by the way. Julian doesn't expect much of an audience, so it's free."

Julian's expectations, or the lack of them, proved prophetic. Except for a small collection of children from the local schools (whose half-term break was to come a week later than that of the Grammar School), there was the merest smattering of people, and these, Laura surmised, were mostly the parents of the boys concerned in the production, plus one or two local reporters.

She took a seat at the end of the fifth row and studied the programme which a boy in a Grammar School blazer, and wearing the badge of a prefect, had handed to her at the door. Suddenly it occurred to her that, as she could claim acquaintance with the producer, she was offered now an unique opportunity of going behind the scenes to see what happened when an entertainment was actually in progress.

The number of players (according to the programme) was fairly large. In the scene as envisaged by young Mr. Perse, the King and his entourage would be welcomed by the citizens of Brayne, there was to be a loyal address spoken by one Thomas de Maydewell, followed by general acclamation, and then would come the presentation of alms by the saintly (later mentally-afflicted) monarch, to the poor of Saint Lawrence parish. After this—the programme notes were full, informative, and the loving product of Mr. Perse's summer holiday leisure—there was to be the solemn ceremony of the royal touch against the King's Evil.

The second scene purported to take place in the banqueting room of *The Hat With Feather*. A further note on the programme informed those who took an interest in such matters that, in the time of Henry VI, the inn had been known as *The Leopards and Lilies*, but that the name had been changed to commemorate a lively little skirmish, on the twelfth of November, 1642, between the Royalist troops and the Parliamentarians.

Laura folded the programme, stuffed it into her coat pocket, and looked around her. Among the teachers in charge of the chattering schoolchildren she wondered whether she could identify Mr. Gordon. There was only one schoolmaster in the auditorium. He was in charge of a mixed group of younger children whose principal way of passing the time, except for eating sweets and (in the case of the little boys) committing puppy-like assaults upon one

another's persons, appeared to be by taking it in turns to visit the usual offices.

Laura had a retentive memory for faces, and was certain that the schoolmaster *was* Mr. Gordon. This view received confirmation when young Mr. Perse came in front to receive the Mayoress who, he informed the sparse and indifferent audience, had kindly consented to be present. A boy then presented the Mayoress with a bouquet of chrysanthemums, there was unenthusiastic applause, and young Mr. Perse returned to his place behind the scenes by way of a swing door which led to a passage which, in its turn, led to the dressing-rooms.

To gain this door he had to pass by Laura's gangway seat. She promptly grabbed his sleeve, hissed, "I'm coming with you," released him, and followed him into the corridor. Here he turned and faced her.

"The curtain's going up at once, now that the Mayoress is here," he said. "Sorry I can't stop. Where's Aunt Kitty?"

"Never mind Aunt Kitty. You cut along and start the proceedings. I'm on a detective snoop behind the scenes. Is that Gordon with those kids?" He nodded. "Right. See you later, I hope."

What else she hoped she scarcely knew. She had had some vague but exciting idea that now the scene of Falstaff's murder was peopled again, some clue to the mystery of his death might manifest itself. The last time she had been backstage she had been in company with Dame Beatrice and Kitty, and, except for their presence, the rooms had been deserted, but now boys were already in the wings waiting to go on. Other boys were flitting hither and thither with no apparent object. Dressing-room doors were being left open by the actors and were being shut with exaggerated care by a couple of prefects in school uniform. A harassed junior master was imploring all and sundry to "get back in there, you clothheads, and don't make such a row." There was music from the school orchestra. This had

been pressed into blasphemous service and was annoyed at the prospect of losing part of the half-term holiday. There was a temporary silence backstage, followed by a slight creaking sound, as the stage curtains, operated by a pulley, fell apart to disclose (Laura supposed) a throng of the loyal citizens of Brayne in the year 1445.

Nobody took the slightest notice of her as she passed the dressing-room doors and peered in at the room which was used for refreshments. This time the long deal tables were bare, and nothing but an array of plastic cups and a pile of cardboard picnic plates of various sizes on shelves at the far end gave to the initiated a clue as to the usual function of the room. The only window offered a depressing view of a concreted area furnished with two heaps of coke and a line of dustbins. Laura tested the window-fastenings, but these were pegged so that, except for an opening of two inches or so which had been allowed at the top, the windows let in a certain amount of air and light, but offered no prospect of affording a way in or out of the building.

She passed on into *Bouquets*. This time there was only one nylon overall hanging from its peg. Apart from this, the room was in exactly the same state as before, except that some water and two or three chrysanthemum leaves, plus some soaking wet paper towels on the side of a bowl, afforded circumstantial evidence that the Mayoress's bouquet had been in protective custody in the room before the stems of the flowers had been dried prior to presentation.

While Laura was contemplating these unhelpful additions to the terrain, a woman wearing a nylon overall and a workman's cap came in.

"They've already took the bookie," she said. "The Mayoress, she's been give it. You're too late. One of their mistresses, is you?"

"No, I'm the lawful wedded wife," replied Laura, deliberately misunderstanding the question, "of Detective

Chief-Superintendent Gavin of the C.I.D. He can't be here himself, so I'm having a poke round on his behalf."

The woman looked at her suspiciously.

"Ow did you get in?" she enquired.

"In the usual way, by the front entrance," said Laura.

"Shut the door, please. I have some questions to put to you."

"Oh, you 'ave, 'ave you? Well, I ain't a-shuttin' no doors. 'Ow do I know what you're up to?"

"If you're not satisfied, you'd better ask Councillor Perse what I'm up to," retorted Laura. "I met him a minute or two ago, so I know he must be somewhere about."

"Oh, if you're a friend of Councillor Perse's I suppose it's all right," the woman conceded. She went to the door and shut it. "Well, what do you want with me?"

"Some information which you may not possess. You remember the last pageant that was held here?"

"Not likely to forget it. If ever I 'ayes to come 'ere of a night I takes care to bring my little girl with me. If I never 'ad nobody with me I might take to seein' things. This place is 'aunted, I reckon."

"Haunted? Whatever makes you think that?"

"Deeds what is done in the dark of the moon carries their ghosties about with 'em."

"Ah, you mean the death of Mr. Luton. But that wasn't a dark deed, you know. There was some stupid fooling about with the swords which were used in the play. Mr. Luton got hurt, and nobody liked to own up to doing it."

"Oh, that's what they *say*," said the woman, "but there's them of us as knows better."

"How do you mean? You can't go against the verdict at the inquest."

"Ho, can't I? Then p'raps you'll tell me just one thing: what 'appened to me keys which turned up missin' and which 'asn't been seen from that day to this? If that don't

mean sommat fishy, well, I don't know what funny going ons is."

"First I've heard of this," said Laura, in a studiedly casual tone. "Why didn't you tell the police?"

"I told Mr. Castle. It was up to 'im to pass it on, if he'd a mind to, and I s'pose 'e did."

"Would Castle be the caretaker?" asked Laura, with a vivid recollection of the fermenting John at the end of the Town Hall rehearsal of *The Merry Wives of Windsor*.

"Yes, it would. John Castle, 'im as lives in Brocklebank Way, off the 'Am."

"What about the keys?"

"Well, it bein' an evenin' do, I comes in at 'arpast four and has a look round to see as everything's as it should be, leavin' me keys in this door, same as I allus does, not to lose 'em, you see, or forget 'em, and so's to be all ready for when I comes to tidy up the next mornin'. Well..."

"You mean you left your keys in this lock all night?"

That's what I'm a-sayin', ain't it? Well, when I comes in in the mornin' I looks for me keys and they isn't there, so I goes to find Mr. Castle and I says to 'im, "'Ere, John,' I says, 'what you done with me keys? I can't get in to clean them rooms, not without no keys I can't,' I says."

"Oh, so this isn't the only room you keep clean?"

"Gawd, no! I does all the rooms this end. There used to be a time when us cleaners swopped the jobs around, but Councillor Mrs. Skifforth, she put a stop to all that. 'The way things is,' she says, 'you don't know who to blame if the place is a pigsty,' she says. 'Hin my opinion,' she says, 'each cleaner did ought to 'ave 'er own part of the premises to be responsible for, and to take a proper pride in,' she says, 'and then if things is left in the disgraceful way the ante-room to the Council Chamber was—all cigarette ends in dirty ashtrays and a half-eaten macaroon underneath the table, not to speak of two coffee-cups as I washed up with

me own hands,' she says, 'well, we'll know where we stand,' she says."

"So none of the other cleaners would be likely to walk off with your keys?"

"Not no good to nobody 'ceptin' me. So I goes to Mr. Castle..."

"Who hadn't got them, either?"

"That's what 'e says. 'You must of left 'em at 'ome,' 'e says. 'That's just like you women,' 'e says. So I up and informs of 'im as I never takes no keys 'ome, there bein' nothink worth burglin' in the rooms 'ere as I 'ayes to see to, so I borrhers a lend of 'is master-key and 'ands it straight back as soon as I'd unlocked, and there you are. And a nice bit of box-fruit them dressing-rooms was, I don't mind tellin' you."

"And the keys have never turned up?"

"That's exactly what they never 'aven't. Mr. Castle 'ad all the locks changed and a noo set of keys to go with 'em. That's what 'e thought would be best, and I 'as to 'and 'em back to 'im each time."

A good deal of clatter from outside the door of *Bouquets* was sufficient evidence that Henry VI had concluded his anti-scrofula campaign and that the stage was to be re-set as the principal room at an inn.

"Only one more thing," said Laura. "When you did get this room unlocked with the master-key, was it in the state you expected to find it?"

"It was the only clean and tidy room in the place."

"Yes. You didn't notice anything which struck you as being *different*, or out-of-place, or anything? Just some small point that perhaps no-one but yourself would notice?"

The cleaner scowled thoughtfully before shaking her head.

"There wasn't nothink at all. It was only them keys bein' took like that as was hodd. Somebody done it for devilment, p'raps. You never know what kids 'ull get up to, do you, and

there was a hundred on 'em 'ere that night, so Mr. Castle told me, and chewin' gum all over the place."

Laura was back in her seat in time to see the curtain go up on a room at *The Leopards and Lilies*, the feasting begin, and the raising of two gentlemen of the neighbourhood to the status and rank of the Knighthood of the Garter. When the curtains had come together for the last time, she went in search of the caretaker and found him on the front steps of the Town Hall standing at the salute as the Mayoress was driven away by the Mayor's chauffeur in the Mayor's official Rolls Royce.

"A word with you, Mr. Castle," she said. "You remember me, I expect? Yes, well, the police, as you probably know, are still interested in the deaths of Mr. Luton and Mr. Spey, and as I'm, so to speak, connected with them through my husband, who is in the C.I.D., I want to know what happened to Mrs. What'shername's keys—the cleaner who looks after the dressing-rooms, you know."

"Councillor Perse told me about your husband, ma'am. What's more, the police are in the right of it. There wasn't no horseplay where Mr. Luton was concerned. After all, they wasn't a lot of college lads, or nothing of that, to go fooling around with swords and stabbing each other to death. What I says is as what was done was done deliberate. As for Carrie Busby's keys, well, I did think at first as how she must 'ave left 'em at 'ome, but when they never turned up no more—and her swearing as she'd left 'em in the lock outside the door—I 'ad another think about it."

"I wonder whether your thought was the same as mine?"

"Well," said the caretaker slowly, "things being as they was that night—by which I mean no bookays, so no need to use that room at all—why shouldn't Mr. Luton 'ave been done to death in there, and the body locked up in there till the 'All was cleared and everybody gorn 'ome?"

"And then the murderer sneaked back and put the body and the basket in the river?"

"No, I reckon he hid in *Bookays* with the body. I've thought about it and that's how I size it up, ma'am."

"But wouldn't somebody—probably you yourself—have done your last rounds and locked that side door which gives on to Smith Hill—the only door he could have used to get the body out of the Town Hall and down to the Thames?"

"He'd only have to turn the 'andle from inside. It's a Yale lock, you see. And then, when he'd done the job, all he'd have to do would be to pull the door shut behind him. We don't never bolt it for the simple reason it don't have no bolts. It wasn't never meant as nothing but an emergency door, you see, in case there might be a conflagration backstage like."

"Which way did the people taking part come in?"

"Oh, by the front door and then down the passage to the dressing-rooms."

"So this door on to Smith Hill wasn't opened until the two comedians left the hall, and again when some of the actors went across to the pub, I suppose."

She joined Kitty at Julian Perse's rooms, and at a quarter past four Mr. Perse came in, ate a great many sandwiches in an incredibly short time, drank a scalding cup of tea, and then tore out again to superintend the revels in the Butts.

"I suppose we'll have to go," said Kitty, "Look here, Dog, don't you bother. I'll see the thing through on my own. You've done your whack this afternoon. I'll give you the keys to my flat, although I think there'll be somebody in..."

"I'm not going to miss an eighteenth-century election, Kay. I feel that Julian would be wounded were I not among those present."

"*You'll* probably be wounded if you *are* among those present. The whole thing will be a free-for-all for the local mods and rockers, you see if it isn't. I still think Julian is absolutely mad! There's sure to be no end of trouble."

“It sounds like a melee of a sumptuous kind. Count me in on it. I wouldn’t miss it for the world. How long does he propose to keep it on?”

“I’ve no idea, but I suppose he’ll pack it up before sunset. It’s not the kind of thing you’d want to carry on in the dark.”

They reached the Butts at a quarter to six, Laura having indicated that they ought to give Julian time to “get the thing nicely warmed up” before they arrived on the scene to observe and criticise his efforts.

The Butts presented a very different spectacle from that which Laura and Kitty had seen on the morning of the first pageant. Instead of lorry-loads of milling children, a full turnout of the pony club, a dozen or so gleaming cars, some self-conscious men and sumptuously-costumed women, the broad Butts this time contained nothing more spectacular than a couple of wooden platforms, one at either end of the street. Each platform supported a table and a backless bench and was flanked by roughly-made wooden steps, one set, as Laura remarked, on the O.P. and the other on the prompt side.

One platform was labelled *Mr. George Cooke*; the other, *Mr. Fraser Honeywood*. An audience mostly composed of schoolchildren filtered irresolutely between the two. The adult population of Brayne was represented by a smattering of bovine-faced women, a couple of policemen on duty, two coalmen, pausing after having delivered the last load of the day, three collarless dogs, a telegraph boy, a girl doing an evening paper round, Mr. Giles Faudrey seated in his sports car, and one or two of the Butts residents who had come to their front gates to find out what was going on. Julian Perse was seated at one table, presumably acting as polling clerk for Mr. George Cooke, and his headship-hunting friend lolled on the platform dedicated to Mr. Fraser Honeywood. A succession of sheepish-looking boys took it in turn to mount each platform, mutter a name to the master in charge and

cross over to leave the platform by the opposite flight of steps.

"Poor Julian!" said Kitty. "What a ghastly fiasco! Even some rough stuff from the jobs would be better than this!"

"More in keeping, too," observed Laura. "If there was one thing more than another which these junketings provided, it was a glorious free-for-all, including the beer. We'd better attract Julian's attention, so that he knows we're here to support him. I'll go up and vote, shall I?"

Kitty held on to her coat-sleeve.

"Don't be an ass, Dog!" she said. "Look, I'll tell you what we'll do. We'll make sure that he's seen us, and then we'll walk about a bit and look interested..."

"How do we do that?"

"And look interested, and then we'll go to *The Hat With Feather*. Their saloon lounge is most respectable, and it does quite decent snacks. What do you say?"

They returned from *The Hat With Feather* to find that, during their absence, the scene at the Butts had changed. The jobs had had their tea and were not yet ready for the coffee-bar, the breaking-up of the Youth Club, the Mods and Rockers brawl on the canal bridge, or even a visit to *The One-Eyed Pig*, their chosen local. To fill in time before tasting these more delectable dishes, they had looked in on the eighteenth-century election in the Butts. The melee, so earnestly sought after by Laura, appeared to be in full swing. It was concentrated around the two hustings, the wide open spaces of the Butts being inimical to the use of broken bottles and flick-knives as giving too much opportunity to the Grammar School adversaries of employing evasive measures. Not that the Grammar School appeared to be in any mood for these. For too long, was the general feeling, had the school been compelled to put up with gibes, insults, stone-throwing, and being pushed off pavements or having their school caps twitched off and flung in the path of heavy traffic. Now, out of school hours,

forty or fifty strong (and armed, as part of their costumes, with cudgels in the form of rounders sticks borrowed privately by Julian from the girls' school), they were giving a good account of themselves.

The two policemen had leapt into the fray, but were making little impact upon the milling youths. Julian, dancing about on the platform, was apparently shouting his head off, but whether to urge on reluctant voters or in encouragement or denunciation of the battle, it was impossible to say, as his voice made no impression on the din.

"Here," said Kitty, "let's get out of this. There will be police reinforcements along in a minute and we don't want to get mixed up in anything."

"All right," said Laura. She seized a passing arm and smacked down hard on a hand which was holding a knife. There was a yell of pain, and the knife tinkled on to the roadway. Laura kicked it into the gutter. As its owner, with hideous curses, bent to pick it up, she kicked him and sent him sprawling. "I've always wanted to do that to one of them," she said, as they left the field of battle, "so home, James, and don't spare the horses. I noticed that Giles Faudrey did not stay to see things through."

"I expect he was bored, and left soon after we did," said Kitty. "Tell me all about the Town Hall show this afternoon."

Laura obliged with a succinct account, and added, "I found out that Falstaff's murderer could have lurked in that room labelled *Bouquets* until he saw his chance to do the job. It looks as though it must have been somebody in the cast. You know that door at the back?"

"Yes, the two comedians left by it."

"I know. But it's got a Yale lock. Nobody could have come in that way. The murderer, therefore, was already on the premises."

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The Death of Edward III

“From the date of this deplorable event until the middle of the...century, history records little concerning local matters...”

It had been laid down as a command by Dame Beatrice that Laura was to stay the night in Kitty’s flat. From what she knew of young Mr. Perse, Dame Beatrice had added, Kitty might be glad of a girlhood friend with whom she could share her woes.

Twigg was at home when they arrived. He produced bottles and a shaker and informed Laura that dinner would be ready at half-past eight. When the incoming tide of relaxation had set in, he ventured to enquire whether the pageant had been a success.

“Well, it has, from Laura’s point of view, but I don’t know yet about Julian,” Kitty replied. “Laura made a yob yell, and he dropped his knife, and then she kicked him. After that we skedaddled.”

“Retreated in good order,” amended Laura. Twigg put his head on one side. “We did, you know,” said Laura. “No panic. Just a strategic withdrawal. You see, old Kitty, with her usual omniscience, deduced that police reinforcements were on the way, so, as we didn’t want to get our names in the papers...”

“Let’s have it from the beginning,” suggested Twigg. “One of you at a time, if possible.” He settled down for a

cosy twenty minutes or so, having taken the precaution of pouring himself a second cocktail before he left the sideboard. At a nod from Laura, Kitty began the tale. There was not so very much to tell.

"Julian got his elephants all right," said Kitty. "I made Dog come away before they began to stampede or something. The Roman costumes were good, and he'd made some poor boy learn yards and yards of Latin—cruelty to children, I call it—and there wasn't a smell of the Mayor from beginning to end of the pageant. At least he didn't boycott *mine*."

"He'd hardly dare to, surely. Didn't he approve of Julian's project?"

"I don't think it was that, because the Mayoress turned up to the Chapter of the Garter, during which Dog..."

"Only during the first scene," put in Laura.

"During which Dog sneaked away behind the scenes and cowered there until the interval."

"Doing a spot of detective work. Sneaking and cowering didn't come into it. Strike those words from the record," commanded Laura.

"Well, anyway, after the Romans—oh, I forgot to mention Domesday Book. It was terribly dim, but the Batty-Faudreys gave us coffee and then Julian went back to school to round up his boys for the afternoon idiocy—this Garter business and the election stuff in the Butts—and we had some lunch and Laura went along to the Town Hall. The rest of it you know."

"Be interested to find out how the *fracas* ended. Why don't you give Julian a ring?" asked Laura.

"What, worry the poor innocent after the kind of day he must have had?" cried Julian's kindhearted aunt. "I only hope he isn't drowning his sorrows too deep. He's got to go to school again tomorrow."

"I think you'll find that, from *his* point of view, the pageant was a great success," said Laura.

“With that awful battle at the end, Dog?”

“The usual give-and-take of an eighteenth-century election. I bet he’s delighted the jobs turned up in force and started a brouhaha.”

This view was confirmed by the young man himself. He held a long telephone conversation with Kitty at ten o’clock that evening and, professing himself delighted with the way things had gone, canvassed her opinion upon the proceedings. Kitty replied, without reserve (for she was a generous-hearted woman), that she thought the pageant had been an all-out success. She enquired whether there had been any trouble with the police.

“Not a whisper, after the gangs had scarpered,” Julian replied. “I indicated that the in-fighting had been a put-up job and received official disapproval for provoking a breach of the peace, but everything ended with goodwill on their side and malice towards none on ours. I have received innumerable tributes from my lads to the effect that they hadn’t had such a good time for months. I gather that there will be more than one oik with a nasty headache tonight. I must cultivate this game of rounders, complete with lethal weapons. It has its own attraction.”

“He’d talk himself out of anything,” said Kitty, returning to Laura and Twigg. “No wonder he got himself elected on to the Council.”

Two days later there was a different story, however. Laura had returned to Dame Beatrice’s Kensington house after lunching with Kitty on the morning which followed Julian’s pageant, and was rung up as she was dealing with Dame Beatrice’s correspondence. An agitated Kitty was on the line.

“That you, Dog?”

“Speaking.”

“I say, something terrible has happened.”

“Always something nasty in the woodshed. Say on.”

"While we were milling about in the Butts, that man Gordon—you know the one I mean?"

"He who took Edward III and the second servitor upon him? Spey's schoolmaster buddy?"

"Oh, Dog, he hanged himself from the Druid's Oak!"

"Half a minute, while I confer with the Great Panjamdrum."

Kitty obediently stood by while Laura went to give the news to Dame Beatrice.

"Looks an open-and-shut case," she observed, when she had given Kitty's news to the head of the household, "at least, I suppose the police will think so. Falstaff is killed; Spey, who knew how and why, is done in; the murderer of both, either in a fit of remorse or because he has reason to believe that the police are wise to him, jumps out of the vicious circle. I don't believe a word of it, you know."

"Do you not?" said Dame Beatrice. "I am inclined to agree with you. Go back to the telephone and comfort Mrs. Trevelyan-Twigg, and then we will ask our dear Robert for his reactions. He is not the man to come to hasty decisions, except in one particular."

Laura grinned.

"Go on with you! Don't rub it in," she said. "Even now that I've had leisure to repent of marrying him, I don't really think I do." She returned to the telephone.

"Oh, thank goodness for that!" said Kitty, when Laura had slipped her the information that Dame Beatrice did not believe in Gordon's guilt. "No more do I, and as for Julian, selfish little beast as he is as a general rule, I've never known him so upset about anything. He says Dame Beatrice *must* find the murderer."

"I think she knows who it is, but it's going to be awfully difficult to prove it," said Laura soberly.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Some Questions Answered

“Now with the language of trees, and the literature of the running brooks we have no concern for the moment...”

Laura’s discovery of the head had produced some information. An examination by a leading authority on forensic medicine showed beyond doubt that Spey had been hit on the head with sufficient force to stun him if not to kill him. The inquest on Gordon resulted in a verdict of suicide without the merciful adjinder that the balance of his mind had been affected.

“In other words, he’s supposed to have cheated the law,” said Laura. “Well, I stick to what I said. I still don’t believe it. I think he was murdered, the same as the other two.”

This opinion was stoutly upheld in another quarter. Miss Cattrick, headmistress of the Primary School at which Spey and Gordon had worked, took up the cudgels in the form of a letter to the local press. She could not believe (she wrote) that Gordon would have taken his own life in so extraordinary a manner; in fact, she did not believe that he had taken his own life at all. She realised that, in company with other members of the Brayne Dramatic Society, he had been under severe pressure since the death of Luton, and she realised, also, that the dreadful fate of Spey, his friend and fellow-teacher, had affected him greatly, as, indeed, it

had affected everyone connected with the school. But if Gordon had committed suicide (she continued) he was “the gas oven type” or, if he was set upon hanging himself, there were the banisters in his own home. He had lost his wife and child in a road accident, and had lived alone for the past six years, so that there would have been nobody in the house to prevent or dissuade him. She reiterated that she did not believe he had committed suicide. If he had, she insisted, it certainly would not have been in the melodramatic fashion described. She added that she had had him on her Staff for fifteen years and understood his mind and character. She believed, in fact, that he had been murdered, and that the motive was the same as that in the case of Spey. He knew, or had guessed, the identity of the murderer of Luton, and so was as much a danger to this maniac (she used the word advisedly and deliberately, she said) as his fellow-teacher had been.

The editor of the local paper did not print the letter. He showed it to the police. These passed a copy of it to Gavin, knowing him to be interested in the extraordinary deaths at Brayne, and Gavin came down to the Stone House in Wandles Parva to show the copy to Dame Beatrice.

“I know our chaps weren’t altogether happy about that suicide verdict, any more than they still are about the Misadventure pronouncement on Luton,” he said. “Look here, Dame B., why don’t you have a private look-see into things? I’ll tip off the lads, so you needn’t look to having any of them interfere with your fun. You see, between ourselves, there are far too many question-marks with regard to these deaths. To begin with—well, look, I’ll list ’em, and perhaps you’d care to make a note or two.”

His list answered some of the queries which Dame Beatrice had already put to herself. It cleared up some doubtful points and spotlighted others. Exhaustive enquiries on the part of the police had shown that it was not only unlikely that the death of Luton had taken place during the

interval at the Town Hall show, but that this was virtually impossible. If it had not taken place during the interval, then it had not been brought about through the agency of the sword which had been borrowed to replace the one which the costume people had neglected to send.

“Old hat. We worked that one out ages ago,” said Laura.

“I wonder,” said Dame Beatrice, looking up from her note-taking at this point, “why the Dramatic Society did not telephone for the missing foil when they discovered, at the dress rehearsal, that it was not among the properties? It seems to me that it would have been a very simple matter for the costumiers to despatch it in time for it to reach the Town Hall for the performance.”

“I know. Our chaps went into that pretty thoroughly and elicited the fact that, as each member was responsible for paying for the hire of his own costume, there was an unresolved argument between Collis and Carson—the two who took the parts of Ford and Page—as to whose job it was to send for the missing sword. Neither would give way, so no second sword was worn at the dress rehearsal, but the real sword turned up on the night, borrowed, of course, from Colonel Batty-Faudrey’s collection at Squire’s Acre Hall.”

“Who borrowed it?”

“Ah, that’s where we come to a blank wall. Nobody at the Hall has any idea. Colonel and Mrs. Batty-Faudrey had gone out to dinner—a private invitation from the Mayor, apparently—the servant who answered the door could give only the vaguest description of the visitor—‘he wore a raincoat and a trilby and spoke educated’—and Giles Faudrey, told of the request to borrow a sword, ‘had said to bung him up to the long gallery, and then you can go to bed. Tell him to help himself. I’ll toddle up there as soon as I’ve finished my chapter.’ We’ve tackled Giles, of course, but he says that he forgot all about the fellow until he heard the front door being shut, and so never saw him at all. Evidence obtained from Mrs. Batty-Faudrey in support of this is that

whenever Giles has an interesting book he becomes so much absorbed that he probably wouldn't notice if the room was on fire. His powers of concentration were out of the ordinary. This statement was slightly qualified by Colonel Batty-Faudrey, who added that Giles was a lazy lie-about who ought to be in the Army, where they'd occupy his time for him and teach him a few manners into the bargain. Giles, it appears, has no consideration for anybody. Comes and goes as he pleases, and at all hours of the day and night, is a supercilious puppy, leaves his car outside the front door because he's too bone-lazy to put it away now there's no manservant to do it for him, and, to be brief, is, generally speaking, the Colonel's pet pain in the neck."

"Where was Giles when the sword was borrowed?" asked Dame Beatrice. "In which room, I mean."

"In the library. It's a ground-floor room. The long gallery, as you probably know, is on the first floor."

"At what time, approximately, did the sword-borrower arrive?"

"Soon after half-past ten. He came in a car, but the servant can't speak to the make or the number. That's natural enough, of course."

"And at just after half-past ten, Colonel and Mrs. Batty-Faudrey had not returned from their dinner-party? I wonder when the visitor left?"

"Giles puts it at about a quarter to eleven, but can't be sure. The servant didn't hear the car drive away. Colonel and Mrs. Batty-Faudrey didn't get back until half-past eleven because the Mayor had run a series of cine-films after dinner, and as one of them showed the Mayoress and the Mayoral children on holiday in Spain, including a visit to Gibraltar, where the Colonel had once been stationed, the session had been protracted."

"So, except for the servant, who is unable to give any useful description of the visitor, nobody saw him at all?"

Nevertheless, a visitor came, and at a time which indicates that the dress rehearsal was over."

"I know. Oh, there's no doubt about its having been one of the actors. Nobody else would have bothered whether a sword was missing from the play or not."

"I suppose the visitor, left to himself, didn't borrow *two* swords while he was about it?"

"We put that theory to Giles Faudrey, but both he and the Colonel dismissed it. All the same, the medical evidence showed that the wound must have been caused by an instrument having the same measurements, so to speak, as the first few inches of the borrowed sword, and our inference still is that a precisely similar sword was used, so our men had a very good look at the rest of the Batty-Faudrey armoury. It contains three other precisely similar swords, all of their hilts well finger-printed by Giles and the Colonel, who keep them clean—one of the very few jobs which Giles deigns to undertake."

"When were they last cleaned, I wonder?"

"According to the Colonel, his wife, and Giles, on the morning of the pageant. Mrs. Batty-Faudrey insisted on their being given a special bit of spit and polish because she was having all the notables to tea in the long gallery that afternoon. She was rather peevish, it seems, about anything having been lent, because it spoilt the symmetry."

"It looks bad for the Colonel and young Mr. Faudrey, does it not?"

"We can't go as far as that, you know. It's true that neither of them has an alibi for the time of the murder. Both were out for the evening and so was Mrs. Batty-Faudrey. She went to spend the evening with her sister who lives in Maidenhead, but, although the Colonel drove her there, leaving Squire's Acre at just after six, he merely dumped her, drove on into North Oxford, and looked up some friends of his own. He hasn't any alibi, because he did not get to North Oxford until well after the murder had been

committed. His story of having trouble with the car on Henley Fair-Mile may sound a little thin, but there's no reason why it shouldn't be true. Besides, he doesn't seem to have had the shadow of a motive for plotting Luton's death. I don't suppose he even knew the chap."

"Oh, yes, he did," said Laura, who, except for one remark, had been a silent listener to the conversation. She rehearsed the incident of the girl on the Colonel's knee at the Squire's Acre masque, and referred also to the donkey which had turned a dignified display of dressage into a comic turn.

"And Luton was thought to be responsible for both," she added. "He seems to have been known for a practical joker of a harmless sort of type. Once, in one of the drama club's efforts, he let off a gun in the wings instead of bursting a paper bag."

"They're not the kind of things you kill a man for doing," said Gavin. "You'd have to be potty to take them to heart to that extent, and, whatever the Colonel is, he certainly isn't insane."

"What about young Mr. Faudrey?" asked Dame Beatrice. "Is it known how he spent the evening?"

"Oh, Giles says he dined on some cold stuff he found in the pantry, read a book for a bit, became bored and so went out in his car, picked up a girl and took her out for a night drive and a late supper. He didn't pick her up until nearly nine o'clock, though, so he has no alibi for the time of the murder, but there, again, like his uncle, he had no motive for it, either."

"He's the one for my money, all the same," said Laura. "A nasty, mean little bit of work if ever I saw one. Look at the way he thought he could pull his rank with old Kitty, and ride beside the float with that frightful girl on it! Look at the way he showed off on the schoolboys' trampoline in front of the whole of Brayne! Look at the way he flaunted that same beastly girl in front of his aunt and uncle and the Mayor and

Mayoress! Kitty told me all about that. It was disgusting behaviour. He's a rotten little cad. Moreover, although he pretended to treat the donkey episode as a joke, he was just as livid about it as his aunt and uncle were."

"All this doesn't add up to murder," said Gavin patiently. "In fact, what it *does* add up to is that it is far more likely somebody would have murdered *him*, rather than the other way about."

"I suppose the police have returned the borrowed sword to the Colonel by this time?" said Dame Beatrice.

"Oh, yes. They had no option, once it was established that that particular sword could not possibly have been the weapon. There's one interesting point about that, though. There were traces of blood on some of the rags that constituted the dirty linen in the clothes-basket. The rags, it seems almost certain, had been used to wipe the blood off a knife-blade of some sort."

"Mrs. Croc. thought that had been done before the basket was dumped in the Thames," observed Laura. I'd wondered why the murderer bothered to do that. I suppose he thought the tide would come up and wash off the bloodstains. At first I thought he wanted the river to float the basket away."

"Has anything more come out about the other two deaths?" asked Dame Beatrice.

"Nothing more than you already know. Spey's wife has been interviewed, of course, poor woman, but she's firm that her husband had no enemies. There doesn't seem any doubt but that he was killed because he knew too much about Luton's death—or somebody *thought* he did."

"Well, doesn't that absolutely *prove* that Luton was murdered?" enquired Laura.

"Not absolutely, no. Even if that death *was* by misadventure—not, as I say, that we think it was—it's amazing the things people will do to avoid being blamed. Look at hit-and-run motorists. The majority of people, if you

ask my opinion, will go to almost any lengths to avoid facing the music.”

“So the instrument which must have been used to decapitate Spey hasn’t turned up, then?”

“No, it hasn’t.”

“You should jolly well turn Squire’s Acre Hall inside out. Somebody there—and I plump for Giles—is the nigger in the woodpile, you know.”

“My dear girl, without the hell of a lot more evidence than the slight amount we’ve got, we’re not in a position to do anything of the sort.”

“What about my having found Spey’s head bang opposite the end of Squire’s Acre park?”

“Ask yourself! You found it easy enough to go along that path when you left the canal. What was to prevent the murderer finding it just as simple?”

“Well, he’d got the head in a bag. I hadn’t.”

“He’d have gone by night, of course. There wouldn’t be a soul along the towing-path after dark.”

“It would have been much safer, and ever so much easier, to have strolled down through the park with it. Don’t forget you wouldn’t even need to have a key to the gate in the railings.”

“I know. I’ve been along and had a look for myself. The fact that two of the railings have been wrenched apart doesn’t mean a thing. Boys are always up to that kind of lark.”

“You don’t convince me,” said Laura obstinately. “Added to the Batty-Faudrey sword, it seems to me that the thing’s in the bag.”

“Like the head,” said her husband. “Still, I hand it to you over that. It wouldn’t have occurred to me in a hundred years to connect the name Squire’s Acre Arm with the head tucked underneath same. I said a while ago that Colonel Batty-Faudrey isn’t mad. I take it that the same goes for

Giles. And it's a madman we're looking for. I'm absolutely certain about that. What do *you* say, Dame B.?"

"I am not in agreement with you, except in so far as that all murderers are mad."

"But this horrible historical pottiness!"

"I know. Shakespearian pottiness, too, if one thinks of Falstaff."

"I suppose," said Gavin, looking at his wife in an apologetic manner, "this young nephew of Kitty Trevelyan-Twigg's couldn't be involved in any way? Forgive me, Laura, but we may as well look at the thing from all angles."

"I have never refused to turn over stones and explore avenues," said his wife, with dignity, "and I'd say you've got something there. It was he who mooted the idea of Kitty's beastly pageant in the first place, and it was he who insisted upon staging the second one, too—and that was entirely wrong-headed and unnecessary of him. Come to think of it, it was he who took us by way of the canal to that private road where Spey's body was found, whereas we could have got there far more quickly by car. Besides, he's a graduate, which means, presumably, that he's well up in Shakespeare and so forth. Moreover, he's a Councillor, and has the history of the borough at his fingertips. I do hope and trust it *isn't* Julian, though. Break old Kitty's heart, if it is. But I do think his *bona fides* should be subjected to scrutiny, and I can't say fairer than that. After all, who else thought of dancing round Hangman's Oak, of all the potty ideas!"

"That's the one thing which gives me pause," said Gavin. "Would he really have wanted his boys to do a ritual dance round a hanged man?"

"Well, of course, I'm as certain as can be that Julian isn't the murderer. All the same, you ought to check up, if only to put him definitely in the clear. But before we begin tailing him, I must put old Kitty wise."

"Not kind of you."

"I'm not prepared to go behind her back. If we're putting Julian under suspicion, she's got to know. Don't worry. She's got plenty of guts. If she hadn't, she wouldn't be where she is today."

"Well, you know her better than I do, but if I were under suspicion, I'd hate to have somebody *tip you* off."

"Sheer sentimentality! I like things to be brought into the open. Then I feel I know where I am. Let's give Mrs. Croc. the casting vote."

Dame Beatrice, looking like a benign lizard, smiled with closed lips.

"I agree with Laura," she said. "Mrs. Trevelyan-Twigg must be told. You will find that she has had secret thoughts of her own. Her apparent woolliness of mind is deceptive. In her own way she is highly intelligent."

"You think old *Kitty* has wondered whether Julian...?" said Laura, too much amazed to be able to finish the sentence.

"I do, indeed. As I say, Mrs. Trevelyan-Twigg, under a natural coverage of simplicity and guilelessness, is an extremely shrewd woman. Of course she has wondered. You will find that, far from being distressed by your revelations (as our dear Robert fears will be the case), she will welcome an official enquiry. *Some* bad tidings can bring a sigh of relief because they lighten tension. I feel certain that the points you have listed, and which seem to tell against young Mr. Perse, have already occurred to his aunt, so—cards on the table, as you rightly suggest, my dear Laura."

"And stress that Dame B. is helping the police in their enquiries," said Gavin, "although not in the sense in which those words are usually interpreted."

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Dame Beatrice Puts In Her Oar

“Mr. Carnegie then proceeded to open the door of the Building amid loud applause, after which the company passed to the Lecture Room by way of the grand teak staircase.”

Laura had not over-estimated Kitty’s courage, nor Dame Beatrice her secret anxieties.

“*Of course* I’ve wondered, Dog,” she said. “Mind you, I don’t believe for a single instant that Julian is mixed up in it, but ever since he insisted on staging that idiotic, unnecessary, stick-his-neck-out second pageant I’ve had some nasty moments. I haven’t said a word to a soul, of course—not even to Twigg—but that Edward III business cost me a lot of sleep. It was so *potty* of Julian to do a second pageant. I thought it was *fairly* potty when, in his cocky way, he put up for the Council, and I was quite staggered when he was voted in, but if he had anything to do with these murders he must be *completely* round the bend.”

“Wouldn’t his headmaster have noticed?”

“Well, he did carpet him when he found out that Julian had approached the girls’ school with a view to their taking part in the second pageant, and Julian was ass enough to talk back at him—something, I should have thought, judging from our own experiences at school when a row blew up, was the craziest thing in the world and simply pleading for a

kick in the pants. So there you are! How will the police set to work?"

"By putting Mrs. Croc. on the job, official-like."

"So we'll get at the truth, thank goodness! When does she begin?"

"Well, we've moved into the Kensington house for the winter, so I imagine she'll begin at once."

"One thing—Julian isn't a liar," said Kitty, on a reflective note, "and he's the sort of boy who, once you've fastened on to him, you've got him in a cleft stick, if you see what I mean. He's quite brainy at academic things, and I believe he's quite a good teacher, but he isn't what I call practical."

"How well does he know Giles Faudrey?"

"Not very well. There was some funny business about a girl, so what he knows he doesn't like."

"How right he is! Well, be seeing you! Hold the head high. Mrs. Croc., in chasing Julian, will really, I think, be putting her finger into many another pie."

They parted, and Laura returned to her employer.

"Old Kitty is in good heart," she reported. "It had already occurred to her that the nephew's conduct has been a trifle remarkable. She doesn't think he's a murderer, of course, but she's worried enough to want to get at the truth. Where do we start?"

They started by inviting Julian Perse to spend the weekend with them in the Kensington house. Having spent Saturday morning in refereeing a school football match, he turned up at lunch, a personable, carelessly dressed young man who ate with a good appetite, asked permission to smoke a pipe when Laura produced cigarettes, and then cast a wary although quizzical look upon his hostess.

"And now, Dame Beatrice, what about the Third Degree?" he said. At these words Laura mentally exonerated him. Dame Beatrice merely cackled. "No, I'm perfectly serious," he said. "My excellent aunt tipped me off. 'Tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, for

matters must not be left where they are,' says she, staggering me by managing two word-perfect quotes in a single sentence. So now, fortified by your quite marvellous lunch, not to mention a claret which my totally uneducated palate probably did not sufficiently appreciate, I am at your service and am Ready to Tell All."

"I can see why you got yourself elected on to the Council," said Laura.

"Watch my progress, which will be upward and onward. As soon as they put up teachers' salaries to the level which our talents should (but do not, alas!) command, I shall be Mayor."

"How well did you know Mr. Luton?" asked Dame Beatrice.

"Quite well, really, I suppose. I used to be a member of the drama club before I got on to the Council. That cut into my evenings, so I felt I had to resign. Rather sorry, in a way. Acting boosts one's ego."

"What did you make of his character?"

"He was one of these insufferably well-intentioned little men. You know that he used to run a Sunday School, of course, but that wasn't the limit of his disinterested good works. He was a peacemaker, and I maintain that peacemaking causes a person to be so much disliked that none but those with the hide of a rhinoceros should attempt it."

"Had Mr. Luton such a hide?"

"I think he must have had—yes. There was such enormous scope for peacemaking in the drama club that anyone not possessing the said hide must have given up the unequal struggle, and Luton never did. I think somebody got sick of his public-spiritedness and bumped him off, you know."

"Was peacemaking his only social error?"

"No, no. He was for ever putting in 'a word in season,' if you know what I mean. 'I don't want to interfere in any way,

and I expect you think it's no business of mine, dear old chap, but mightn't it be better if—' all that kind of thing. Well meant, I don't doubt, but damned irritating, all the same."

"Gosh!" said Laura. "No wonder he got himself murdered. Did he ever try it out on you?"

"Oh, yes, more than once. The first time I bore with him in a mood of silent contempt. The second time I treated him to some four-letter words he probably hadn't heard since his schooldays. After that, he gave me up as a bad job, I think, although he did tell me that he had not voted for me at the local election, and deplored the fact that such as I should be in a position to put the morals of the people of Brayne in jeopardy."

"How did he come to obtain the part of Falstaff in the play, I wonder?" said Dame Beatrice.

"I don't know. I should guess that nobody else wanted it, so Sir Highmindedness nobly took it on. I expect that to shove him in the washing-basket gave the rest of the cast much pleasure."

"I wonder what made the Dramatic Society choose an excerpt from *The Merry Wives of Windsor*?"

"There were two reasons, as I see it. First of all, there was the question of the title. We of Brayne are, for the most part, suspicious of and allergic to Shakespeare. *The Merry Wives* and *A Comedy of Errors* are probably the only works by the Bard which you could bill in our borough if you wanted to sell more than the first two rows of seating in the Town Hall. We go by titles. Even *A Midsummer Night's Dream* would be suspect. Secondly, a play had to be chosen in which the talent and beauty of Mesdames Gough and Collis should be seen to be equally bright. Except for Cecily and the other gal in *The Importance of Being Earnest*—and, even then, both, to my possibly untutored mind, are completely overshadowed by Lady Bracknell..."

"Yes, we've met Mrs. Gough and Mrs. Collis," said Laura, interrupting the flow. "Did you go to the performance on the night when Luton was killed?"

"No, I did not. If I *had* gone, it would have been in support of Timms, who runs our school choir, but I opted out, and the short straw fell to Manley."

"You didn't go?—and you a Councillor?"

"I pleaded that it would make the cast nervous if they knew that a former shining light of the drama club was in front. I was thanked personally by the Mayor for my public spirit."

"What *did* you do, then?"

"Alas, darling Laura, I went wenching, and spent the evening in a very dull pub with a dead-from-the-neck-up blonde in the environs of the Charing Cross Road. I almost wished I'd gone to witness the downfall of *The Merry Wives*."

"Who was the girl?"

"How should I know? I picked her up in a bus. Her name was Heliotrope and her boyfriends, so she informed me (and, incidentally, everybody else in the bus), called her Hell. All I can say is, if hell is as dud as she was, I shall buy myself a nimbus and opt for heaven."

"So you can't produce an alibi for the evening of the performance in the Town Hall?"

"Well, I shan't attempt to track down Heliotrope, if that's what you mean, and I don't suppose the barmaid would remember me after all this time. If she did, I'm certain she wouldn't remember which evening I was there."

"It's a great pity you weren't with the Mayor and the rest of the Councillors that night," said Laura, sternly.

"Oh, I don't know. I've enjoyed today's lunch, which I certainly shouldn't have been given if I hadn't been under suspicion of being a murderer, should I? Add to that my never-failing delight in your society, darling Laura..."

“Take it as read. Now, then, we know that you were well acquainted with Spey and Gordon.”

Julian’s lighthearted manner dropped from him.

“Yes,” he said, soberly, removing his gaze from Laura’s face and fixing it unseeingly on a corner of the handsome, old-fashioned room, “I *was* well acquainted with Spey and Gordon, and if anything I can say or do will help to find their murderer, you can count me in.”

“Did you gather or deduce, from their conversation or demeanour, that either or both of your friends guessed the identity of the murderer of Mr. Luton?” asked Dame Beatrice.

“No, *ni l’un, ni l’autre*,” responded the young man. “I’m certain they hadn’t, either of ’em, an inkling. But I’m equally certain the murderer thought Spey had, and then I believe he had another think, and concluded that Spey might have told Gordon his suspicions.”

“The whole thing, then, as we have assumed from the beginning, hinges upon the death of Mr. Luton. From what you have told us this afternoon, it seems to me probable that Mr. Luton was responsible for borrowing the sword from Colonel Batty-Faudrey’s armoury. I wonder how much credence we should attach to Mr. Giles Faudrey’s asseveration that he did not set eyes upon his visitor that night?”

“Personally, I wouldn’t believe a word the little reptile said, unless I was in a position to prove the truth of it.”

“Whence comes this pronounced dislike of a man with whom you are only superficially acquainted?” asked Dame Beatrice.

Julian laughed. He bowed theatrically.

“The psychiatrists have a word for it,” he said. “He was up at Cambridge whilst I was merely at U.C.L. Moreover, when we were both up, he beat me at chess, and I rather fancied myself at chess. Apart from that, he’s a poisonous little squirt where women are concerned. I know of two local

girls he's got into trouble, and I wouldn't be surprised if there were others. Oh, and Luton, so I heard, tried to get him to marry one of them."

"Giles claims *droit de seigneur*, no doubt," interposed Laura. "Does it derive from his uncle, do you suppose? The Colonel seems to have a ready and welcoming knee!"

"Goodness knows! But because he lives at Squire's Acre, and his aunt is as rich as Croesus, nobody except Luton cared to cast down the gauntlet before Giles. The girls in question (and their parents) may even have taken a certain pride in the fact that Giles's attention has been attracted to them. It's astonishing the point of view some of these people have. Why, one of the girls in question told our After Care Committee that her baby had blue blood in him! Why are girls such lunatics?"

"The answer is in the sob-stuff pages of the women's magazines. Their correspondents are always being asked to prove their love," said Laura. "But we are side-stepping the point. The pricking of my thumbs informs me that Dame B. has another question, or, more probably, other questions, to put to you."

"To have no alibi," said Dame Beatrice, "for the day and time of a murder, is almost a proof of innocence. Your suggestion that Mr. Luton may have taken upon himself the task of admonishing Mr. Faudrey is within the realm of possibility, but would he have been moved to do so in a general way? Is it not more likely that..."

"Gosh, yes! One of his Sunday School teachers!" cried Laura. "Of course! I can see it all!"

"Oh, darling Laura! How naughty of you!" said young Mr. Perse, dodging a blow which was aimed at his ear.

"Besides, I can see it all, too. There's this fussation about the missing sword and (if I know them) a few other little matters connected with the drama club, and Hiawatha the Good decides that he can put one thing right, at any rate. As soon as the dress rehearsal is over, he climbs into his

minicar and tazzes along to Squire's Acre. There he borrows the sword (with permission) and then, when Faudrey comes up to the long gallery (which I'm absolutely positive he did), Luton confronts him with the fact that one of the Sunday School teachers has blotted her copy-book and is now in the make-me-an-honourable-woman market."

"It makes sense," said Laura. "Do as I tell you, and marry the girl (says Luton) or there'll be a word, this time, in the ear of the Colonel."

"So much for speculation," said Dame Beatrice. "Now it seems likely—in fact, it is as certain as anything incapable of proof can be—that Mr. Spey was killed on the Friday evening, although his headless body was not found until several days later. Do you remember what you did on that Friday evening?"

"The same as I almost always do on a Friday in term-time. Saw the First Eleven at half-past four for a final check-up and pep-talk against Saturday morning's match, stayed in the Staff-room until a quarter to six to clear up any arrears of marking—can't expect the boys to keep up their interest if the previous week's work isn't corrected up to date—went with Sims to the local nearest the school and had a pint and a couple of sandwiches, went on to my digs and changed into a dark suit, and so to the Town Hall and the usual Friday-night meeting of the General Purposes Committee. That usually lasts until about ten, which leaves just nice time for a nightcap in the pub on the opposite side of the high street."

"Was Mr. Sims in the Staff-room with you while you were correcting your pupils' exercises?"

"No. He was in the gym playing badminton with some of his boys. I went along to fish him out when I'd finished my job."

"So that you would have had plenty of time to knock Mr. Spey on the head without anyone being the wiser?"

"Plenty of *time*, yes, but that's where it would begin and end, you see."

"How so?"

"Because, from four-thirty onwards, the whole of our school building is crawling with women cleaners. If one puts her head in at the Staff-room door and says, in *very* disgruntled tones, 'Oh, sorry, sir. Didn't know as anybody was 'ere. I'll 'ave to leave it till last, then,' I should think never fewer than four of them do. It's most distracting. In the end, the first who turned up just simply comes in, tight-lipped, and sweeps and cleans all round you. It's devastating."

"But supposing that you had *not* been in the Staff-room during the time you claim to have been there, could you still produce an alibi?"

"No, of course not. But I *was* there. Any of the cleaners will tell you so."

"For a Friday, yes, but do you think they would be prepared to swear to that particular Friday?"

"Oh, I see. Well, no, I wouldn't think their memories were all that reliable. And, of course, some of them would say *anything* if you put it into their heads. So you mean I had only to make some verbal arrangement with Spey, when we met for our usual Friday lunchtime drinks and eats, to get him to come up to school somewhere between four-thirty and five-thirty, we'll say, and there I am, but *not* (as I claim I was) in the Staff-room. Where do you suggest I was when I did for him?"

"Games shed," said Laura, in response to a glance from Dame Beatrice. "Cricket bats, you know. All you'd need to do would be to give him something to inspect—preferably at the very back of the shed—come behind him, bash him over the head, leave him there, lock the shed—you seem to have a good deal to do with the games, so, naturally, you would have a key—and there's the body all nicely stashed away until you can behead it and carry it along to the private road

which leads to the ducal park. Any flaws in the reconstruction?"

"It's beautiful. It might have come out of a book. The only weak point is that Belton, my captain of cricket, always took the key of the games shed from its hook in the secretary's office as soon as he turned up for the match on a Saturday morning. He got out a couple of balls and the stumps and bails, and a bat or two for the chaps who hadn't got their own, so I can't help thinking that he would have noticed the body, you know, even though it was the morning of the Goodman's School match."

"Not if you had come back at night on the same Friday and taken the body away in your car. What do you say about that?" demanded Laura.

"The school gates are locked as soon as everybody's gone home. The schoolkeeper sees to that. I couldn't possibly have taken my car into the grounds—that, at least, can be proved—and even you, darling Laura, highly though you seem to regard my iron determination and scheming brain, can hardly venture to think that I would carry the body to the school gate and climb over, holding it in my arms. Apart from that, how on earth could I have persuaded Spey to tog up as Henry VIII, if I'd merely invited him to come and have a look at the games shed?"

"You know, I almost think we'll have to put him in the clear," said Laura to Dame Beatrice. "All the same," she added to Julian, "everybody wishes you hadn't thought up that beastly second pageant. It played right into the murderer's hands. You and your Hangman's Oak!"

"I was thinking more of the Druids than of the hangman, please, when I suggested the dancing round the oak, and, do you know, some of my revered colleagues on the Council now want to chop the tree down. I can see their point of view, but I think it would be rather a pity."

"Yes, it is not as though poor Mr. Gordon was killed by being hanged on the tree," said Dame Beatrice, "or that he

committed suicide by hanging himself from its branches.”

“I’m glad you don’t agree with the suicide verdict,” said Julian. “I don’t, either. I’m sure he wasn’t the type. I read about the inquest in the local paper. It was very fully reported, and I noted particularly that there were two distinct lines of markings on Gordon’s neck.”

“Yes, I noted the same point. It was suggested that the deceased had made two attempts to hang himself. I wish I had been able to see the body,” said Dame Beatrice.

“However, through the good offices of Laura’s husband, I hope to obtain permission to study the photographs.”

“What do *you* think happened, Dame Beatrice?”

“I feel certain that Mr. Gordon was garrotted, although not with an iron collar, which seems to have been the Spanish custom, and afterwards hanged from the Druid’s Oak by the murderer.”

“Wouldn’t the marks made by the garrotting look different from those made by the hanging? I thought doctors could detect that sort of thing.”

“Quite so, but that point was covered by the suggestion that the deceased had made two attempts at suicide. And now I shall be grateful if you will introduce me, next Sunday morning, to the gentleman who impersonates sunbeams.”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

The Sunday School Point of View

“The records of nonconformity in Brentford are extremely meagre, and devoid of historic interest. There is, indeed, a long-standing tradition which associates the name of John Bunyan with the religious activities of the town...but there seems to be no reliable evidence to support this tradition.”

The hall in which the Sunday School was held was considerably larger than the chapel in whose grounds it stood. This (explained Julian, who was escorting Dame Beatrice) was so that it could be let for lectures, bingo sessions, whist drives, and dances, to the financial advantage of the trustees, who thus were not obliged to put their hands into their own pockets as often or as deeply as in the years before the hall was erected. (One of the brethren who had been wrong-headed and sinful enough to send up what proved to be a winning Treble Chance had salved what remained of his conscience by donating five thousand pounds of his prize money towards building the hall, so that bingo and so forth could be played there. That bingo is also a game of chance most fortunately occurred to nobody.)

The Sunday School was run on sober Edwardian lines. Each child was provided with a stout card ruled out in fifty-two small squares. A table near the door supported a large register and the elbows of two young men. The young men

were armed with pencil-sized rubber stamps, one of which bore a star, the other a zero. If a child arrived early or just on time, its card received a star; if late, it was still credited, but only with a zero. In order to be eligible to attend the annual Sunday School treat, it was requisite and necessary that a total of thirty stars or the equivalent in stars and zeros (a zero counted as half a star) should be stamped on the card and entered in the register.

“The mathematics of the thing are elementary, of course,” said young Mr. Perse, explaining the system, “but I suppose the general idea is to favour punctuality, and not a bad idea, either, when you come to think of it. More frustration, bad language, and ill-temper are caused by people keeping other people waiting than by almost anything else on earth. My own love-life is frequently springing a leak because I will not be kept hanging about for girls with whom I’ve made a firm date. Mind you, Dame Beatrice, I am a reasonable man, and I’m prepared to concede ten minutes. Nevertheless, ten minutes is my limit. If the party of the second part hasn’t turned up by then, she’s had it, and can jolly well buy her own fish and chips.”

“Excellent,” said Dame Beatrice. “I think the proceedings are about to begin. Are we to be favoured with sunbeams, do you suppose?”

It turned out that they were not to be so indulged. A hymn, a too-lengthy extempore prayer, a reminder that the Missionary Society was (as usual) short of funds, a scraping of chairs as each Sunday School class grouped itself round its teacher, an outbreak of Bedlam as the lessons commenced, and the Sunday School settled down to what appeared to be normal routine.

The secretary, who was still acting also as superintendent, came to the bench at the end of the hall where Julian and Dame Beatrice were seated. Julian performed the introductions and added that Dame Beatrice

would like to ask a few questions about “poor Luton’s work for the Sunday School.”

“Yes, well—would it be too chilly for you if we went out into the porch? It’s difficult to talk in here with so much noise.” In the porch the secretary added, “What aspect of Luton’s work were you thinking of? He was very active in all branches, and, of course, a worker in our wider field.”

“You mean he worked for the chapel as well as for the Sunday School?”

“Oh, yes, and for the Youth Club, too. He was a very active worker, very active indeed. He used to do a good deal of social work, in addition.”

“Ah, yes, social work,” said Dame Beatrice. “What did that entail?”

“Well, mostly it was fallen women. He was extremely earnest and very sympathetic. On one occasion we had trouble in persuading him that it wasn’t in her best interests for him to marry one of them. One of our Girls’ Friendly girls, unfortunately. When Luton found out about it, he went to the man and put it to him, but the man refused to have anything more to do with the girl. He said there was no proof that he was the father and that he denied he was. Luton got very upset, especially when the man told him to marry the girl himself if he felt so strongly about it.”

“And Mr. Luton was prepared to do so? How long ago was this?”

“Oh, when he was a very much younger man. At one of the Wednesday meetings for men, he asked for guidance, and, of course, it is our custom to ask aloud for guidance, so that matters can be discussed, if necessary, by everyone present.”

“And the meeting persuaded Mr. Luton that...”

“Well, it was throwing himself to the dogs, as it were. I took it on myself to point out that people not knowing him as well as some of us did, might regard it as a sign of his own guilt if he married the girl. Moreover, as the husband of

a fallen woman, we could hardly allow him to continue as Sunday School superintendent. It wouldn't have been seemly."

"Oh, would it not?" asked Dame Beatrice.

"Oh, no. You see, there's the saying about no smoke without fire. They gossip, you know—even the best and most upright—and where there's gossip, well, I hardly need to tell you that scandal is never far behind."

"Only too true, I am afraid, but could gossip in the town really harm the chapel or the Sunday School?"

"If it was to be confined to the town, as such, perhaps not, but, you see, there was a little *coterie*—if that's the word—who attended our Mothers' Pleasant Afternoon, who would have been likely to, well, draw their skirts aside, if you know what I mean, and that certainly wouldn't have helped matters."

"So some of you talked Mr. Luton out of his self-sacrificing dream?"

"Yes, in the end, we did. It's all very well to see yourself as a Good Samaritan, but, in this case, what seemed at first to him to be the right thing to do was going to be so damaging to the good name of our chapel and Sunday School that—well, we just couldn't let him do it, and, anyway, the girl was dead against it, too, as you can understand. Mr. Hughes, our pastor, had the last word. He told him, straight out, that he would no longer be permitted to be Sunday School superintendent if he persisted in carrying out his idea."

"What you tell me is extremely interesting," said Dame Beatrice.

"Yes. The latest trouble has been one of our Sunday School teachers. A very sad business that is."

"But Mr. Luton did not renew his attempt to..."

"Well, of course, he's older and wiser now—he *was*, I mean. We only knew about it shortly before his death. Of course, he went along to see her—being, as I said, a very

keen social worker—and our pastor, Mr. Hughes, has been to see her too, but she said she only wanted to be left alone, and her mother was standing by her, so we didn't see what else we could do."

"And you feel sure that, this time, Mr. Luton did not propose marriage to her?"

"Oh, I'm certain he didn't. This time he didn't even ask for guidance, you see. He would ask for guidance before taking any such action, of course."

"And the guidance he obtained on the former occasion convinced him that his well-intentioned plan, if he had carried it out, would have been against the interests of the chapel and the Sunday School. Yes, I see that he would not have attempted to carry out a similar plan the second time. By the way, did Mr. Luton know the name of the baby's father on this second occasion?"

"I don't know for certain, but I think he must have done, because what he said to me this last time was to the effect that it wasn't as though the fellow couldn't afford to support a wife, and so I think he must have known or guessed who the father was. Still, he named no names, and, in these days, there's many a young man employed in this town at a rate of pay quite sufficient to marry on if they have honourable intentions."

"Would you mind giving me the girl's address?"

"Well, it can't do any harm, I suppose. Are you from the Unmarried Mothers' Society?"

"No. I am investigating, with the approval of the police, the death of Mr. Luton and the others."

"I thought the police were satisfied Luton's death was an accident."

"The coroner's jury thought so; the police are still looking into the matter. They want to find the man or woman who caused the death, whether or not it was accidental."

"Oh, I see. And you're helping them?"

"In my capacity as psychiatric adviser to the Home Office, yes, I am."

"Well, I wish you luck, I'm sure. Of course, Luton was a rare one for a practical joke in a mild way, but this went rather beyond a joke, didn't it? Come inside, and I'll look up that address and write it down for you."

The home of the unmarried mother was in a cul-de-sac off the high street known as Paddock Place. It had been agreed, in accordance with his own suggestion, that Perse should escort Dame Beatrice to the house and then leave her to conduct the negotiations as she thought most fitting.

The front door opened directly on to the alleyway, for there was no front garden, and it was opened by a respectable-looking woman in a flowered overall. From the rear of the premises came the smell of cooking.

"Yes?" said the woman.

"Mrs. Darbey?" asked Dame Beatrice. She handed the woman a visiting card. "I have just come from the Sunday School, where I was given your address. May I have a word with your daughter?"

"Mabel's out. What did you want? We're not interested in the Welfare, or nothing of that."

"I am not connected with the Welfare, but with the police."

"You better come in, then. That Mrs. Coggins next door got her ears on elastic." She stood aside and Dame Beatrice entered the parlour. It was clean, and the floor and furniture had been polished. The wallpaper-pattern was somewhat unrestrained, but the armchairs and settee looked comfortable and Mrs. Darbey immediately lighted the gas fire. "Now," she said, "I don't see what the police have got to do with it. There's no law against a girl making Mabel's mistake, is there?"

"I am not aware of such a law. What I have come to find out is only obliquely concerned with your daughter, Mrs. Darbey. Do you know the name of the baby's father?"

"No, Mabel wouldn't say. Said she wouldn't marry him, even if he asked her, which he wasn't likely to do. So it's no good you or the police thinking it's any use bugging along them lines. She'll get over it, and, although I've spoke my mind, I reckon she's only in the same boat as half-a-dozen others I could name. She means to have the baby adopted, and then she's going to live with her auntie and uncle at Wolverhampton for a bit. Time she gets back it will all have blown over, I daresay. It ain't the disgrace it used to be, you know. Nobody don't think all that much of it nowadays. After all, it's natural-like. The baby's the unlucky one, not the mother."

"I asked whether you knew the name of the baby's father for a reason which does not really affect your daughter at all."

"Oh? How's that, then?"

"He may be wanted on a charge of murder."

"Oh, my goodness! Murdering who?"

"I am not prepared to tell you that at present."

"Well, what's it got to do with Mabel, then?"

"I assure you, very little. If the father is not the man I think he is, then, probably, nothing at all. Come, Mrs. Darbey, you know who the father is, don't you?"

"Mabel's never said."

"That isn't an answer. You suspect someone. I'd like to know who it is. After all, as I have told you, murder is suspected and..."

"Suspected? I thought it was proved."

"You are thinking of the schoolmaster, Mr. Spey, but I am referring to the death of the Sunday School superintendent, Mr. Luton."

"But the paper said..."

"Yes, I know what the paper said. What the papers say is not necessarily the whole truth, is it?"

"If I was to tell you what I think and believe, I might find myself in trouble. It don't do to say all you think. I don't

want to find myself in a police court, so I ain't naming no names. I've got no proof, and Mabel won't say. I expect she's frightened, like I am, of being had up for putting the blame where I reckon it will never be proved. Them that's in high society can do as they like with the law, same as they always could. So now, if you don't mind, I've got to see to the dinner. Mabel's dad is up the allotment, as usual of a Sunday, and he'll be hungry when he comes in."

"Very well, Mrs. Darbey," said Dame Beatrice, getting up. "It has been very good of you to let me talk to you. If I give *you* the name of the man, will you tell me whether you agree with my opinion?"

"No," said Mrs. Darbey, flatly. "I've had quite enough trouble, as it is, over all this business. Mabel's acted real silly, and I'm not the one to deny it, but perhaps she couldn't help herself, being in service and all that. Anyway, soon as the baby comes it'll all be over, and with any luck we'll have a quiet life once more. Thank you for calling, and I'm sorry I can't oblige, but the less said the better, and I haven't got no proof."

"Giles Faudrey will run into trouble one of these days," said Dame Beatrice, in an offhand tone, "but you are probably wise to say nothing, even to me."

"Who told you I meant Giles Faudrey? You don't mean... here, you're putting words in my mouth! I never said a word about Giles Faudrey!"

"One of us had to," said Dame Beatrice, "and now that we've gone as far as this, we must go a little bit further. How did Mr. Luton find out that Faudrey was the man?"

"I've no idea, I tell you, and I don't want to say any more."

"Not even although I assure you that I believe the father of your daughter's baby to be a triple murderer?"

"Please go, please do! I don't want to get mixed up in anything, I tell you...and I don't know nothing for sure."

"It seems that Mr. Luton must have done. How would he have found out?"

"I don't know! I suppose he got it out of Mabel! I must see to the dinner! Please go."

Dame Beatrice returned to the Sunday School hall and reached it to the sound of the bells from the parish church. Julian was waiting at the gate. The Sunday School children were leaving the hall to go home and, at a further gate, the congregation was drifting in for the eleven o'clock service in the chapel. It seemed, thought Dame Beatrice, that the Darbey family must sit down to their Sunday dinner at an unusually early hour.

She went into the Sunday School hall and was able to buttonhole the secretary once more.

"Just one thing," she said, "before you go into chapel. Would you have called Mr. Luton a reckless man?"

"I don't know that I'd use that word. He had a lot of courage. If he ever thought someone was doing wrong, he said so, not mincing his words."

"Always a risky proceeding, don't you think? At any rate, he seems to have found it so."

"Why, how do you mean, Dame Beatrice?"

"You never suspected that Mr. Luton might have resorted to blackmail, I suppose?"

"Blackmail? You must be joking!"

"No, I am not joking."

"But...Luton? Sunday School superintendent and sang in the choir?"

"Blackmail is sometimes resorted to by persons whose only object is to do what they conceive to be their duty. The road to hell, we are told, is paved with good intentions. I think that, in Mr. Luton's case, he was murdered because of his good intentions, and his murder resulted in the deaths of two other persons."

She rejoined Julian Perse, who was still waiting at the gate.

“Any luck?” he asked.

“Well, my theories have not been disproved. Neither have they led to any real proof, but I do not despair about that. The next moves will have to be made by the police, and I have small hope at present that they will be willing to set my particular ball rolling. However, we shall see.”

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Droit de Seigneur

“...it was a signal to commence hostilities.”

“How did you enjoy yourself?” asked Laura, when her employer returned to the Kensington house. “Are we to take action as a result of your enquiries?”

“I think I must consult our dear Robert before we decide to do that. Something came out which may or may not have a bearing on the matter in hand. The trouble is that all my instincts are at war with my logical deductions.”

“Oh, dear! Psychological conclusions gone haywire?”

“Yes, indeed. I am in the utmost confusion of mind.”

“Well, Gavin won’t be much help over that. I don’t think he’s got a mind. What he relies on are a masculine ego and a policeman’s conscience.”

“It will help me to talk matters over with him. He will know what steps I ought to take.”

“It doesn’t sound like you when you assume such modesty. Why not talk things over with me? You don’t think Gavin is more intelligent than I am, I hope?”

“It is his experience of police work upon which I shall be relying, and his bump of caution, which is so much better developed than your own.”

“At least tell me what you’ve found out. I’m aching with curiosity. I suppose Giles Faudrey is all mixed up in it somehow.”

“He seems to be, but, all the same...”

“Well, what’s wrong with that? We’ve thought from the very beginning that he was a shady little character.”

“Yes,” admitted Dame Beatrice, “I know we have. I obtained an interview with the secretary of Mr. Luton’s Sunday School...”

“Oh, yes, the sunbeam chap. Did he dance for you?”

“No. He gave me the address of some people in Brayne. I called there and obtained an item of information which, although it did not surprise me in itself, is not going to prove very helpful. One of the Sunday School teachers is to be the mother of Giles Faudrey’s child—at least, that is what I gathered. The girl was one of the servants at Squire’s Acre.”

“Well, I can see why that didn’t surprise you, but why isn’t it helpful? It would be *very* helpful, I should think, if you could prove that Luton knew about it and so was in a position, perhaps, to get Giles slung out of Squire’s Acre.”

“I don’t need to prove that Mr. Luton knew about the girl’s misfortune. The secretary (now acting-superintendent) knew that the girl was to have a child, and he informed me that Mr. Luton interested himself in the kind of social work connected with such cases. I feel certain, therefore—”

“That Luton not only knew about the baby, but would have found out who the father was, I suppose. Well, that ties up very neatly with Giles having been the murderer of Falstaff, doesn’t it? I should have thought it was Q.E.D.”

“Yes,” said Dame Beatrice, “that is what I tell myself. The trouble is that I cannot convince myself. I do not think it is the truth.”

“Why ever not? Look at the way it all hangs together. Falstaff, that peacemaking little do-gooder, goes along to Squire’s Acre to borrow a sword in order to smooth over the quarrel between Ford and Page. Giles Faudrey is at home—that much we know for certain—but the rest of his story is all lies. He didn’t shut himself away in the library while Falstaff was left alone to roam about in the long gallery

selecting a sword. That bit never did make sense. Do you agree so far?"

"Yes, I do agree. I have never thought that Mr. Luton was seen by nobody but the servant who answered the door."

"Well, then, the rest is perfectly simple and perfectly obvious. Falstaff taxes Giles with the girl's troubles and gets him to promise to do something in the maintenance line. Giles, who, we shall find, has nothing but his allowance from the Batty-Faudreys to live on, has not the slightest intention of keeping the promise. He probably wouldn't want to, anyway, but, in any case, he knows he can't, for the simple reason that he isn't in a position to fork out ready cash. Are you still with me?"

"You re-state my own arguments in their entirety."

"Then I'm dashed if I can see your difficulty. It's copy-book stuff, this."

"Pray continue your exposition. If you go on long enough, I have a feeling that you will begin to share my doubts."

"I don't think I shall. The story hangs together far too well. Giles watches while Falstaff selects a sword from the armoury in the long gallery. It seems to me that he guides Falstaff's choice, so that he is certain to take one of a matching set. When Falstaff has gone, Faudrey earmarks a similar sword and, early on the following evening, enters the Town Hall and hides away in *Bouquets* until Falstaff is carried off the stage in the washing-basket. Then he inveigles him into *Bouquets* on the pretence of discussing the regrettable affair about the girl, pinks him through the heart with the duplicate sword, locks the body in *Bouquets* to keep it hidden until the show is over, wipes the sword on the dirty washing, and brings the basket into *Bouquets* with the corpse. He probably stays in *Bouquets* himself until he knows the coast is clear and he can dump body and basket in the mud. Anything wrong with that?"

"Nothing whatever. It all hangs together most beautifully."

"Well, then, where's the snag?"

"Go on with your story, for the death of Mr. Luton was only the beginning of the business."

"Yes, I admit that. Well, Giles thinks that he's sewn up the parcel very neatly when he's disposed of Falstaff, and, naturally, he's horribly alarmed and extremely despondent when he discovers that Spey is wise to the whole business and has to be silenced."

"Quite so. Well?"

"Perfectly simple. He offers to take Spey's photograph in the Henry VIII outfit, gets him to Squire's Acre, clumps him over the head, cuts his head off to disguise the method of murder, sinks the head in the river which runs past the woods at the bottom of Squire's Acre park, plants the body in the ducal by-road, and once again thinks Bob's Your Uncle until Gordon pops into the picture. I still can't see where I stub my toe."

"Neither can I, in the sense you mean."

"Of course, we know that Luton was killed at the Town Hall, and we're pretty certain that Spey was killed at Squire's Acre. What we *don't* know yet is where Gordon was killed. Is that what you mean? Is that the snag?"

"I cannot think so. What kind of man do you take Giles Faudrey to be?"

"Oh, the gay Lothario type, and entirely selfish and irresponsible, I would say."

"Yes, selfish and irresponsible. And his motive for committing three murders?"

"To save himself from being kicked out of Squire's Acre for getting girls into trouble."

"Why should we suppose that he *would* have been turned out? There is no evidence in support of such a contention."

"Mrs. Batty-Faudrey strikes me as one who wouldn't exactly view with equanimity a nephew who ran amok among the local girls."

"Maybe not, but I have little doubt that this was a situation which she and the Colonel had been called upon to face before."

"I see what you mean, but this Sunday School teacher affair may have been the last straw that broke the camel's back, you know—or, anyway, Giles Faudrey thought it might be."

"That is possible, of course. My difficulty is to reconcile Giles's behaviour in public, with all its reckless disregard of the conventions—you will remember Mrs. Trevelyan-Twigg's description of the bold and insolent way in which he brought that rather indiscreetly-clad young woman to the tea-table at which his aunt and uncle were entertaining the Mayor and Mayoress—with these extremely odd, bizarre, sick-minded, extraordinary murders."

"Just another way of showing off—the murders were, I mean. Well, of course, the actual murders were straightforward enough—a stabbing, a coshing, and a strangling. It's what was done with the bodies after death that seems so odd."

"Yes, the compensation-phobia of a warped, distorted, essentially introspective mind. From what we know of Giles Faudrey, would you suppose that that is a reasonably accurate picture of his mentality?"

"You agree he's irresponsible?"

"And egoistic—I do."

"Well, he may have thought it was a kind of joke—a nasty kind of joke, I admit—to put Falstaff and basket in the Thames, and cut off Henry VIII's head, and hang Edward III as Edward had intended to hang the burghers of Calais."

"Yes, a young man's idea of what constitutes a joke often leads to a great deal of thoughtlessness and cruelty, I admit, but surely the treatment of these particular bodies

after death—or, in the case of Mr. Spey, probably just before death—must have been the work of a mind diseased? Telephone Robert and inform him that I am going to Squire's Acre to make a few enquiries. If he is not there, leave a message."

"I thought you were going to have a talk with him before you did anything more, and were going to take his advice and rely on his police experience and his bump of caution."

"They will be of more use to me, I think, when I have had a little chat with Mrs. Batty-Faudrey."

"You're not going to Squire's Acre unless Gavin and I go with you. It isn't safe!"

"In that case—not that I share your fears for my safety—Mrs. Trevelyan-Twigg, bless her heart, must give a little hentail party to which she will invite Mrs. Batty-Faudrey, the Mayoress, Mrs. Gough and Mrs. Collis, the mistress of the Brayne ballet company, you, and myself."

"Not the manageress of the Tossington Tots?"

"*Not* the manageress of the Tossington Tots."

"Amateurs only—not that the *signora* is an amateur. According to old Kitty, she gets fat fees from her dancers. She's a frightful old woman, you know."

"Nevertheless, I feel she will round off the party very nicely. Now is there anyone else you can think of?"

"Aren't you having any men at all?"

"I think it is better not."

"Where is old Kitty to hold this binge? At her flat?"

"No, I think it would be much more convenient if we could hold it somewhere in the immediate neighbourhood of Brayne. Perhaps Mr. Julian Perse will know of a suitable hostelry. We must hire an ante-room in which the hentails can be circulated and a larger room where lunch can be served."

"*The Hat With Feather* sounds the right sort of job. I'll ring up old Kitty and put her wise to the scheme, and see

whether she's prepared to muck in." She went to the telephone and returned with the tidings that Kitty was all agog, *The Hat With Feather* would be able and pleased to cope, especially as it was only a lunch and so would not clash with the arrangements of the Freemasons, the Rotary Club, the Philanthropic Society, the Mayor's Banquet, or the Stag at Eve Club, all of which would be certain to make their usual dinner bookings to be worked off before Christmas. "But," concluded Laura, "old Kitty says we won't get the Mayoress to come unless we bring somebody she knows pretty well to hold her hand. She feels desperately inadequate and shy, and lives in the shadow of the Mayor."

"Has Mrs. Trevelyan-Twigg any suggestions to offer?"

"She says there's a woman Councillor, Mrs. Skifforth."

"Then all is well. Councillor Skifforth's invitation can be sent to the Brayne Town Hall, as can that of the Mayoress. Mrs. Batty-Faudrey's address we know and although I do not remember how to reach Mrs. Gough and Mrs. Collis—nor, indeed, at which one's house we met the other—they are almost certain to be in the telephone book. Mrs. Trevelyan-Twigg must tell us where the mistress of the ballet resides, since, in her case, we are helpless. We do not even know her name."

"Right," said Laura. "Important-looking invitation cards ordered in old Kitty's name, I take it, as soon as we've hit on a suitable date for the binge. Hope they're all able to come!"

A date was decided upon, not too near to Christmas but sufficiently far ahead to keep it clear of immediate engagements, the rooms were booked, and the white and gold cards were despatched. To Dame Beatrice's surprise and Laura's relief, all the invitations were accepted with most gratifying promptness, and Dame Beatrice and Kitty paid a visit to *The Hat With Feather* to confirm the arrangements and choose the wines to be offered at lunch.

"I'd just offer sherry beforehand," suggested Kitty.
"Most women like it, and it saves a lot of messing about."

"Sherry and dry Martinis," amended Dame Beatrice,
"and a Dubonnet, I think."

"Oh, well, it's your party, although I've to pretend I'm the hostess," said Kitty. "What, if you don't mind my asking, do you expect to get from it? Laura went cagey on me when I demanded the whys and wherefores, so I gather it must be a mackerel to catch a sprat, as the saying goes."

"It is a sprat to decide the fate of a basking shark," said Dame Beatrice solemnly. "Would you suppose, from what you know of him, that Mr. Giles Faudrey expects to exercise *droit de seigneur* over the female population of Brayne?"

"Nothing would surprise me less. I shall never forget Mrs. Batty-Faudrey's face when he planted that awful girl at the tea-table on the day of my pageant. Silly of her to look so horrified, because she surely must be wise to Giles by now. You should have heard the stories of his love-life which were flying all over the place while I was rehearsing the pageant and they knew he was going to take part."

The morning of the lunch was fair with winter sunshine and sharp with frost, but the rime on the road-surfaces had cleared by the time George had driven Dame Beatrice and Laura to Knightsbridge to pick up Kitty.

"I sent the pub a seating plan which they've promised to put up in the ante-room," said Kitty, "and as soon as we get there I'll nip in and put the place-cards on the table. The Mayoress and you will be one on either side of me, because, of course, you'll be the principal guests, and I've put Mrs. Batty-Faudrey between you and Mrs. Collis. I do hope they've done what I said and given us a round table. Nine is an awkward number for a table with corners, isn't it?"

The Hat With Feather had obeyed Kitty's instructions, as she discovered when she went in to lay out the place-cards. She returned to the ante-room after she had had a word with the head waiter, and settled down with Laura and

Dame Beatrice to await the arrival of the guests. These arrived in two parties. Mrs. Collis and Mrs. Gough, who were obviously enjoying an interval between skirmishes, had brought Signora Brunelli along with them, and the Mayoress and Councillor Skifforth had picked up Mrs. Batty-Faudrey in the Mayoral car driven by the Mayoral chauffeur. Introductions and presentations were made where these seemed necessary, and, over the *aperitifs*, conversation was general, vigorous, and cheerful.

Laura had wondered how Dame Beatrice would approach the matter for which the lunch had been planned. Dame Beatrice did it by turning the table talk, *via* Carey Lestrangle and his pig-farm, to the subject of nephews, and gave a witty account of her own. The subject was one with an instant appeal to a gathering of women. Laura, in fact, proved to be the only nephew-less person present. She looked (and was) interested in the conversation, contributed nothing to it beyond polite appreciation, enjoyed her lunch, and listened for the information of which Dame Beatrice was in search.

It came, such as it was, with the main course.

"Nephews," said Mrs. Batty-Faudrey, "can be a bigger problem than sons."

"Do you speak from experience?" asked Laura, perceiving, in the last word, a cue. "My own son is the biggest problem I've ever faced in my life. But, of course, I haven't any nephews, so perhaps I'm not in a position to judge."

"Well, the same might be said of me, I suppose," said Mrs. Batty-Faudrey. "I have no sons, but, if I had, I doubt very much whether they would present the same problem as Giles does."

She sipped her wine. A hovering waiter refilled her glass.

"Really?" asked Dame Beatrice, allowing her own glass to be replenished. "How do you mean? I have experience of

sons, grandsons, nephews, and grandnephews, and I cannot pretend that any have proved to be outstandingly tiresome—certainly not the nephews.”

“Ah, but perhaps you have not been obliged to have them live with you.”

“No, that has never been my experience. I suppose it would make a difference.”

“In the case of sons, one is entitled to assume that one’s husband will at least be fond of them and welcome them as inmates of the home. It appears that nephews...”

“In my family,” said Signora Brunelli, “we are living in a heap—father, mother, sons, daughters, grandparents, brothers, sisters, all children of everybody—the lot!”

“Ah, well, your customs would be different from ours, no doubt,” said Mrs. Batty-Faudrey, with kindly condescension, “and, of course, they do say that there is safety in numbers.”

Mrs. Gough giggled.

“Oh, dear!” she said. “I thought that only applied to love affairs!”

“Young people need a considerable amount of guidance in those,” said Dame Beatrice solemnly, “but they will seldom accept advice and frequently make what their families and friends are compelled to admit are the most mistaken alliances. A nephew of my own was continually flitting from flower to flower, if I may be allowed to use an expression which comes dangerously close to being a quotation from *The Beggar’s Opera*, and caused his family some anxiety, I believe.”

Laura caught the half-glance from her employer’s sharp black eyes.

“Yes,” she said, “Macheath was some sipper! *How* many wives with child a-piece did he finish up with?”

Mrs. Batty-Faudrey looked pained; Mrs. Gough giggled; Mrs. Collis moaned feelingly, but whether because she deplored Laura’s levity or was sorry for Captain Macheath

and his plurality of wives and offspring did not transpire; the *signora* leapt in where even Councillor Skifforth, a noted supporter of all attempts to limit the world's birthrate, feared to tread.

"In Italy, my country, in our family," she announced, "we kick out these offenders. They would be—how do you say?—not to be given their share of the riches."

"Kicked out and disinherited? What, even though they are your own kith and kin?" exclaimed Laura.

"Family life is good, is pure, in my country. The Church does not stand for nonsense. Besides, no-one has time—not in my family—no time!"

"I think that's the trouble," said Dame Beatrice. "Some of the young people have too much time, and then the trouble begins. Still, I think your custom of turning offenders out of the family circle is a trifle drastic, *Signora*."

"Oh, one couldn't do it in England," said Mrs. Batty-Faudrey. "It would only draw attention to the scandal. I feel sure—although, of course, I have no experience in the matter—I feel sure that the only solution would be to hush the thing up. As for disinheriting—why, it could do nothing but create a criminal."

"I agree, if the culprit, whether youth or young girl, is unmarried. But what of marital infidelity? Are you not in favour of divorce, then, Mrs. Batty-Faudrey?" asked Dame Beatrice.

"I have never considered the matter," said Mrs. Batty-Faudrey, in slightly-thickened accents. "When a wife holds the purse-strings..." She appeared to think that the remark was an unwise one, and did not finish it, but emptied her glass instead.

"But so few wives do hold the purse-strings," said Dame Beatrice. Mrs. Gough giggled; Mrs. Collis sighed; stately Mrs. Skifforth said that wives had only themselves to blame if they allowed themselves to become supplicating doormats in the home.

"The only supplicating doormat I've ever seen," said Laura, "is the one with *Welcome* on it, and, somehow, at those sort of houses, I feel one never is."

The talk turned to the subject of home decoration, on which Kitty proved to be an expert. It went on to labour-saving devices and the impossibility, in a place like Brayne, of getting a reliable charwoman. The lunch concluded, as it had begun, in an aura of goodwill and goodfellowship. Brandy was served with the coffee, and the guests, well-fed and pleasantly tipsy, departed in a flurry of thanks and the usual vague and mostly meaningless promises of meeting again quite soon.

"Just as well that Collis and Company aren't driving, and that the Mayoress, the Councillor, and Mrs. Batty-Faudrey have a chauffeur," said Laura critically. "How did you think it all went? Am I right in thinking that, at some time before the end, you got what you wanted?"

"Yes, thank you, child, I did."

"Oh, did you? I'm so glad," said Kitty. "I say, the Skifforth is a bit of a battleaxe, isn't she?"

"No, I don't think so," said Laura. "Anybody would seem a battleaxe compared with that poor little Mayoress. I bet she won't be sorry when the Mayor's term of office is over. If ever I saw a shrinking violet, she's it."

"Signora Brunelli didn't shrink, though, did she? 'My country, right or wrong!' That was her banner and her slogan, it seemed to me."

"It is customary for exiles to think more highly of their native land than of the one which is giving them work and shelter," said Dame Beatrice. "All the same, except for yourself, my dear Laura, who returned my lobs with unerring skill, the *signora* was of much greater help than anybody except Mrs. Batty-Faudrey herself. *She* made it clear, I thought, that any question of disinheriting her nephew Giles, whatever his social errors, simply does not arise."

CHAPTER TWENTY

On the Trail of a Youthful Councillor

"...one fears that the evidences supporting this assumption are much too involved, and the available materials for settling the point much too obscure and meagre to carry complete conviction."

"Alibis, like promises and pie-crusts, are made to be broken," said Gavin, "so that's where we'll make a fresh start. We'll line up the suspects, and then roll up our sleeves and have a go."

"Don't talk in that beastly way," said Laura. "No wonder Hamish is turning into a thug."

"With such an Amazonian parent as yourself, he could hardly escape his fate. No—*pax!* Hit one your own size! It looks bad if a policeman has to go about looking as though he'd picked a fight with a heavyweight champion. Now, Dame B., what have we got? The floor is all yours."

"And about time, too," said Laura.

"What we have," said Dame Beatrice, "are what I may call without, I think, fear of contradiction, three plain, straightforward murders."

"You mean we ought to ignore the way in which the bodies were treated after death?" asked Gavin. "I should have thought that might give us a clue to the identity of the murderer."

"That is so, of course! Well, we shall do as you have suggested, and begin by making a closer study of those

alibis which, so far, we have merely touched upon."

"You don't mean you're going to have another go at Julian Perse?" exclaimed Laura. "I thought he was definitely in the clear."

"Oh, I hope he is. I see no reason at present to doubt it, but perhaps we can use his alibi as a form of touchstone. You see, it was strange and a little unkind and unfeeling of him not to have attended the evening entertainment in the Town Hall. After all, his aunt was largely responsible for organising it."

"Yes, I agree about that, and, as he was responsible for wishing the pageant on old Kitty, he might at least have had the grace to act willing and show up," said Laura.

"Therefore, why did he not do so?"

"Well, we know why. The supercilious young hound knew it would be a dud show and he'd be bored to death, so he just simply opted out and went off on a toot with some girl he picked up on a bus. He can't identify the girl and he doesn't think the barmaid at the pub would remember him. If you ask *me*, he simply hasn't *got* an alibi for the time when Falstaff was murdered."

"Barmaids have been known, before now, to have very long memories, of course, but, unless young Mr. Perse is arrested and charged (which, I am glad to say, is not likely to be the case) we shall be justified, where he is concerned, in ignoring his behaviour on the night of Luton's death, and we will concentrate, instead, on that Friday evening when we believe that Mr. Spey was killed."

"Oh, yes, the evening when Julian claimed he stayed late at school and then went to a committee meeting at the Town Hall. That means we'll have to question the school cleaners, but I thought we'd agreed that they wouldn't remember that particular Friday more than any other."

"Well, we shall see. We are also still agreed, I take it, that whoever murdered Luton murdered Spey."

"Fair enough, I think. So if we can put paid to the idea that Julian killed Spey, we shall be justified in taking it for granted that he didn't kill Luton, either. Well, I suppose we'll have to go the school. How do we set about that? The headmaster isn't going to be highly delighted when we break the news to him that we're trying to prove one of his bright young men is not a triple murderer, and are having a job to put him in the clear."

"I have a theory that it will not be necessary to approach the headmaster, child. To contact the school caretaker will be more to the point, I fancy. He selects, governs, and even pays the school cleaners, and so long as we let him know that we are on the school premises, we shall dispose of any unwelcome feeling that we are trespassers."

"Suppose Julian himself is there, and we run into him?"

"That is a risk we must take."

"You've got something up your sleeve! You're pretty certain we won't run into him, aren't you?"

"Well, I thought at the time that his pious assertion that the marking of exercise books must be kept up to date was out of character. I do not intend to suggest that he does *not* keep his marking up to date, but I *do* suggest that a schoolmaster who remains in the Staff-room on a Friday evening for that purpose is merely filling in time."

"I can see what you're getting at, of course. You mean that if he doesn't usually stay in the Staff-room on a Friday evening, the cleaners will remember that he did so on this occasion. The snag is that I don't suppose for a minute they'll be able to pinpoint the date."

"I have an idea about that," said Dame Beatrice briskly. "There is an independent witness whom we can contact."

"Oh? Who's that?"

"The school cricket captain. He is certain to have retained last year's fixture list. All we have to do is to check the date of the match against Goodman's School. Even if

the captain has left school, the list will still be in existence. It will have been kept as a guide to next summer's fixtures—at least, I hope so. The boy's name is Belton, if you remember. Mr. Perse mentioned it to us at the time."

"So I look up Belton in the telephone book and obtain speech with him, do I?"

"If Robert has no objections, I think that a conversation about cricket will carry more conviction and give rise to less surmise if it is conducted by a man," said Dame Beatrice.

"He'll be home from school by now," said Gavin. "Let's hope he hasn't gone out, and let's hope he's got the fixture list handy." He rang up the only Belton living in Brayne and asked to speak to the cricket captain.

"Speaking."

"Sorry to bother you, but can you possibly remember the date of your last summer's match against Goodman's School?"

"We played them twice."

"This would be the match played on the Brayne ground."

"Oh, yes. Hold on a minute please...Hullo!"

"Yes?"

"Saturday, June 25th."

"Did you win?"

"No, it was a draw. We had to pack up at half-past twelve, so the game, as usual, didn't get finished."

"I see. Thank you very much." Gavin rang off. "I expect the lad wondered why I rang him up," he said, when he joined Dame Beatrice and his wife. "I was ready with some tale, but I didn't need it. When do you propose to visit the school?"

"Next Friday, at a quarter to five. The cleaners will have begun their work by then."

"Do I come with you?" asked Laura.

"I think not. Elderly ladies are expected to be somewhat inquisitive and eccentric, whereas younger ones who

trespass on enclosed premises are apt to have their motives misunderstood."

"What shall you say to the caretaker?"

"That I am in urgent need of a daily woman, mornings only, and that I wonder whether one of his cleaners would like to undertake the work."

"Suppose one of them would?"

"I think we may dismiss the supposition. To travel up to Kensington on six mornings a week will scarcely appeal to a person domiciled in Brayne."

"Hardly. I wish I were going with you. It would be an education in itself to see you being inquisitive and eccentric."

On the following Friday afternoon George drove his employer to Brayne Grammar School and in at the double gates. One or two cars were still drawn up on the asphalt and boys were still drifting out of school. Dame Beatrice got out of the car and enquired for the caretaker. His house was pointed out by a boy who raised his cap politely when Dame Beatrice thanked him, and she walked over to the small neat building and knocked at the door.

A woman opened it and said, in response to an enquiry, that the caretaker was "in the school somewhere, probably in the art room, which the cleaners have been creating about because the art master always leaves it in such a mess. First floor, at the bend of the stairs."

Dame Beatrice found the art room and the caretaker without difficulty. There was no difficulty, either, about contacting the cleaners once she had stated her business. They were all about somewhere or other, the caretaker assured her. He was busily writing a report on the state of the art room, this, Dame Beatrice surmised, with a view to apprising the headmaster of the cleaners' legitimate complaints.

Dame Beatrice made for the sound of voices combined with the clatter of domestic sweeping and the dumping of

chairs, and, having run to earth a couple of the cleaners, she asked to be directed to the Staff-room. Here she found another woman. She was angrily picking up teacups and saucers from the floor and dumping them on to a large table littered with exercise books and ashtrays.

"Excuse me," said Dame Beatrice. "I have spoken to the caretaker, so he knows that I am in the building. Would you mind telling me whether you are always responsible for tidying this room?"

"Oh, so it's come to the ears of the Board of Governors, has it?" said the woman. "And about time, too, I reckon. If I've left a note once to ask these dratted teachers to clear away their cups and saucers and empty the teapot of an afternoon afore they goes home, I must have done it a dozen times or more. And what happens? The day after I leaves the note the place does get tidied up a bit, and, after that, *not*, till I leaves the next note. Sick and tired of it, I am. What their poor wives have to put up with I don't hardly dare to think."

"I understand that there have been complaints about the state of the art room, too," said Dame Beatrice.

"Same with the woodwork room; same with the science lab. Really, call theirselves schoolmasters! Just look at this Staff-room! I never seen a pigsty in a muckier state nor this!"

"But don't the masters who stay after school to mark books do a little clearing up? Surely they don't attempt to work in this muddle!"

"Them do a little clearing up! Don't make me laugh! Not as they often stay behind. The bell hasn't hardly gone to finish school when half of 'em's half-way down the drive and the other half revving up their cars. You don't catch *them* putting in no overtime marking books. Oh, they'll stop on and show films or rehearse a play or ref. a match or play tennis and badminton—oh, yes, they'll do *them* sort of things, but put theirselves out in any other sort of way they

will not, without they're catching up on their exam. papers and report forms, and *that's* only because the headmaster won't have them sort of things took home for fear of 'em getting lost."

"I had an idea that Mr. Perse often stayed to mark books. The Chairman of the Governors seems to think so," said Dame Beatrice, unblushingly taking that gentleman's title in vain. The cleaner banged another cup on to a saucer and picked up an ashtray in each hand. She flung the cigarette ends into a bucket—most of the ash seemed to have been flicked on to the floor already—pushed an overflowing wastepaper basket into the corridor, clumped back into the Staff-room, and seized the broom.

"It's not for me to tell tales," she said, "but I've no recollection of Mr. Perse staying regular after school, not only the once or twice, no more than the rest of 'em. The only time *he* ever stops on to do any work is when there's a Council meeting earlier than usual. On the Council *he* is, as I daresay you know, and very surprised I was when my husband told me. My husband keeps the Town Hall, you see."

"Ah, yes, the last early meeting was held at some time near the end of June, I believe."

"That's right. I remember it because it was in the next week as they found a man teacher had been murdered. I was ever so upset, because my two children goes to that school—the Primary it is—and I didn't want them to get to know about it, but, of course, they did. You can't keep other kids from talking, and bad news soon gets round."

"And Mr. Perse was in school that evening? I wonder how long he stayed? I have to make a report, you see. Which day of the week would it have been?"

"Same as today—a Friday."

"Oh, yes. Have you any idea how long he stayed?"

"I couldn't say, I'm sure. Four times I looked in to see whether I could do the room out, that's all I know. I got fed

up with it in the end, and I sets to and cleans all round him. That got him out of it. Wished I'd thought of it sooner."

"At what time do you finish work?"

"It all depends. We're paid by the hour for two hours and we don't reckon to stay longer nor that. On a good day we can get all round the school in an hour and a half. Mr. Robbins don't care, so long as the work gets done, but he's a rare one for seeing as it is done. He's fair enough, mind you, but he been a petty officer in the Navy, so it's got to be all bull and bush or else you've had it."

"And you do not remember at what time you finished work on that Friday in June when Mr. Perse stayed late?"

"I couldn't really say, not to ten minutes or so. I clocks on at half-past four, which is to say I puts my head in at the hall door—Mr. Robbins always does the hall and the stage hisself—and then I ups to here and hangs up my hat and coat in the lobby next door and gets my overall on and fetches my things and starts in on the lobby before I comes in here. Well, I suppose I must have popped my head in on Mr. Perse about every quarter of an hour, but that's as near as I can tell you. I does my three classrooms and after I done each one I pops my head in here, this being one of the worst jobs, so I likes to get it over and done with. You can make up a bit of time in the classrooms if you happen to get a bit pushed, but there'd soon be a to-do if *this* room got neglected, for all they makes such a pigsty of it theirselves."

"Yes, I see. Thank you very much. This will materially help my report. I hope I have not taken up too much of your time?"

"Oh, that's all right. I'm glad the Board of Governors is waking up and taking a bit of interest. I can easy make the time up in the classrooms. As long as I gets the wastepaper baskets emptied and the chairs stood down (which the boys is supposed to stand them up on the desks to make the sweeping more easy), the rest can go."

Dame Beatrice drove to the Town Hall and asked the caretaker at what time the early meetings of Mr. Perse's sub-committee took place. His answer checked with Julian's own account and the caretaker, because of what he had read about Spey's death, was able to recall that Julian had been present at the meeting on the Friday under review, that he had been in good time for it, and that it had gone on until half-past nine. If the caretaker felt any curiosity about being questioned thus, he did not betray it. He remembered Dame Beatrice perfectly well from her previous visit to the Town Hall, had decided that she was eccentric but harmless, and he answered her questions civilly and with good humour.

The public house opposite the Town Hall—Dame Beatrice arrived there so soon after opening time that there were only two customers in the saloon lounge—was able, with the help of a blonde who wore an enormous white chrysanthemum as a buttonhole, to confirm that after Council meetings some of the members reckoned to drop in for a snack and a drink. Yes, Councillor Perse was a regular. No, she could not speak to any particular day. Oh, wait a minute, though. Yes, that would be right. Quarter to ten it was, because Councillor Perse, always quite a one, had told her the Council ought to be able to get the licencing hours extended when they were kept so long at the meetings. Would she care to take a little of something? No, ta. No offence, but she did not reckon to take something so early on. Yes, it was terrible, all the things you read in the papers. Everybody was talking about that man what hanged himself out of remorse. The barmaid reckoned as how he must have been listening to Billy Graham, or something of that, and had his crimes brought home to him good and proper. A schoolmaster, too! You hardly knew who was what nowadays, did you? And to think of all them poor little kids being taught by a dirty murderer.

“Of course,” said Laura, “even if Julian stayed in the pub until closing time, which is what you think the barmaid indicated, I suppose it doesn’t really let him out, but you think its enough to go on, and Gavin agrees.”

“Oh, yes,” said her husband, from the depths of a long armchair. “We’ve never really worried about young Perse. We’ve tackled his landlady, of course, as he’d run this second pageant during which Gordon was killed, but his habits appear to be regular and he has never given any trouble or kept late hours or come back unpleasantly boozed, and he always pays his rent on the dot and ‘eats normal’—her expression, not mine.”

“He sounds too good to be true,” said Laura critically.

“Oh, I don’t think so. Typically respectable young schoolmaster and Borough Councillor, wouldn’t you say? Well, Squire’s Acre is next on the list. We must make Giles Faudrey confess that he *did* see the man who came to borrow the sword after the Town Hall dress rehearsal that night. I think *I’d* better tackle the Batty-Faudrey angle, Dame B.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

The Batty-Faudrey Angle

“The narrow avenues...were barricadoed, and little breast works were thrown up at convenient places. Furthermore the barricadoes were well defended, but the defenders were unprepared for a surprise attack at that time...”

“If it hadn’t been for the fact that two swords from the Squire’s Acre collection must have been used, should we ever have thought Giles Faudrey might be the murderer?” asked Laura. “I mean, the head having been thrown into the river at the end of the Colonel’s grounds wouldn’t really implicate one person more than another. Anybody could have gone along that path and got rid of it there, as you pointed out to me earlier.”

“So he could,” Dame Beatrice agreed. “By the way, does anything strike you about the way in which the three bodies were treated after death?”

“How do you mean?”

“Falstaff? Cast your mind back to poor Mr. Luton.”

“Stabbed cleanly through the heart—must have died instantaneously—body dumped in Thames, but not otherwise ill-used—is that what you mean?”

“Splendid. What do we deduce from that?”

“Goodness knows!”

“Compare it with the treatment meted out to Henry VIII, in the person of Mr. Spey.”

“Well, yes, I begin to see what you mean. Probably beheaded before Spey was quite dead—the head put in a weighted covering and chucked into the river—the body left almost contemptuously in a private road where anybody might have come upon it...”

“We make progress.”

“I do, you mean. What exactly are you getting at?”

“You said that you saw what I meant. Continue to express your very valuable thoughts.”

“Don’t be unkind. It’s indelicate to make academic rings round morons.”

“Recount what happened to Edward III, and show, in your answer, in what respects, if any, the treatment meted out to Mr. Gordon after death differed from that of the bodies previously under review.”

“Well, it was nastier and more spiteful than that meted out to Falstaff, but, I would say, not as vicious and horrid as in the case of Henry VIII. Of course, we can’t take the head in the river as having any real significance.”

“Can we not?”

“Well, the body was decapitated and the head disposed of in order to disguise the method of murder.”

“That does not make sense, you know. Why should the murderer go to all that trouble in the case of one of his victims when he did not attempt it in the case of the other two?”

“I hadn’t thought of that.”

“Neither had I, at first, but, when one comes to think of the matter, it does seem sufficiently interesting to merit closer attention.”

“That’s true, but my mind’s a blank. However much closer my attention, I still wouldn’t get any nearer an explanation.”

“Oh, but, surely! Think of the three personages involved.”

"Well, we did agree that they were all involved with women in a way which society still deprecates."

"With one substantial and one minor difference."

Laura made a face at her employer and then grinned.

"Aren't you really going to tell me?" she asked. "You might just as well, and stop taking the mickey, you know. I'm all befogged."

"But that is just what you are not!" said Dame Beatrice. "What was the substantial difference, in literature and history, between Falstaff and Henry VIII, going back to your last argument?"

"Women...women...Oh, I see what you're getting at! In *The Merry Wives*, Falstaff is anything but a success with Mistress Ford and Mistress Page, except as a figure of fun, whereas Henry VIII—well, I don't know how successful he was, from one point of view."

"By that you suggest...?"

"Well, I don't suppose any of the six wives married him for love. It was a case of not having been able to refuse, if he asked them, I gather. All the same, he did have the six, and got rid of four of them exactly when and how he chose. He certainly couldn't be called a figure of fun."

"He was a great and powerful king; one who, in spite of his excesses, appears to have won the approbation of the majority of his subjects."

"Well, people do tend to admire those who are larger than life, and Henry was certainly that. What about Edward III?"

"So we exchange roles and I become the examinee. The body of Mr. Gordon was not maltreated more than the murderer deemed necessary in order to maintain the fiction that the crimes were the work of a madman."

"But *isn't* the murderer a madman?"

"According to psychiatry, yes, I think he is, but, under the M'Naughton Rules by which the law still holds, undoubtedly he is not. He is perfectly aware of what he has

done, and he knows that what he has done was anti-social and wrong. He knew this, too, at the time when the acts were committed."

"We know the motive, too. Luton had threatened to expose him to his uncle and aunt because of his hobby of getting girls into trouble. If that happened, he felt he might be disinherited, and as he has no prospects other than to be kept by his uncle and aunt and to inherit Squire's Acre later on, naturally he felt he couldn't let Luton blow the gaff on him. We've already agreed that the other two men were killed because, somehow or other, they knew who Luton's murderer was."

"Even about that I have had a slight change of mind. I agree that we have hit on the right motives for the murders of Luton and Spey, but the killing of Gordon seems to me to stem from a different source. Does nothing strike you about the murder of Gordon?"

"Well," said Laura, dubiously, "there are two things, I suppose, when one thinks it over. Spey was killed pretty soon after Luton, but it was months before the murderer got around to the idea that Gordon might also be a danger."

"And your second point?"

"Oh, ah, yes. All three murders were somehow mixed up with pageantry. The first two were connected in some way with old Kitty's do, and the third was done when Julian Perse put on another silly show."

"Do you detect any special significance in these facts?"

"Special significance? No, I don't think so, unless the murderer was allergic to pageants."

"Was there any good, valid or sufficient reason for staging a second pageant, do you suppose?"

"To my mind, it was a wrong-headed gesture and completely unnecessary."

"So the murderer thought, in a sense. I believe he saw it as a carefully rehearsed trap."

"I believe that idiot Julian did have some such notion, but, of course, it didn't come off."

"I think it has come off now, you know," said Dame Beatrice. "I wonder what our dear Robert will have to tell us?"

Laura looked up and met the keen black eyes and a saurian, mirthless smile.

"You briefed him!" she said accusingly.

"He asked me to do so," Dame Beatrice meekly replied. Laura snorted indignantly.

"You might have put me wise at the same time," she said.

Dame Beatrice cackled.

"Robert cannot afford to make mistakes," she said. "And you are making only one mistake at the moment."

"Oh? Well, you might at least tell me what it is."

"Do you really believe that a doting, although outwardly censorious, aunt, and an uncle subservient (if I mistake not) to that aunt, would disinherit Giles Faudrey because of his amorous adventures and their consequences?"

"I still think he'd be out on his ear in two flicks of a horse's tail if his behaviour came to the notice of Mrs. Batty-Faudrey, this in spite of what you said."

"There, I think, you are wrong. Remember that, so far as we know, neither the girls nor their parents have complained. It was Mr. Luton's heroic role to confront Squire's Acre with its sinfulness."

"And he ran into Giles (although Giles says he didn't) and taxed him with getting the Sunday School teacher into trouble? Yes, we settled all that, I thought. What's new?"

"What I have already said. I do not believe that Giles would have been disinherited."

"He might have had some other motive, then, for murdering Falstaff."

"Yes, he might. I must keep that in mind. Giles Faudrey was successful with women, don't you think?"

"I suppose he was. Are you going off at a tangent?"

"No, indeed I am not."

"Prove it, then, because I don't follow you at all."

"The Sunday School teacher had been a domestic servant at Squire's Acre Hall."

"Well, it used to be a common or garden practise to seduce the servants."

"Used to be? You would not suppose it to be a common practise nowadays?"

"Well, I shouldn't think so, but, if it did happen, I should say the boot would be on the other foot."

"By which you imply...?"

"That servants are like gold-dust nowadays, and a girl who was doing a Daphne would merely have to give in her notice. It was different when servants were two a penny and jobs were hard to get, especially if you left without getting a reference."

"You mean that, nowadays, if an untoward incident took place, it would be because the servant was as willing as her employer that this should be so."

"That's it, but where does it get us?"

"It gets us to the important fact, my dear Laura, that Giles Faudrey is not an employer."

"No, but he's got this fatal fascination we've mentioned, and it was often the son of the house who seduced the servants."

"You would do well to take the car and go for a drive and, in tranquillity, recollect the main items of this conversation. As the schoolmaster said to the insolent boy, I fear we do not see you at your best."

"The trouble is, I'm hungry," said Laura, "and tea-time is in the dim distance. Suppose I nip down to the kitchen and see what I can rustle up in the way of bodily sustenance? Then I'll do as you say. As a matter of fact, I do dimly see what you're getting at. I can't believe it, that's all."

She took herself off and, twenty minutes later, Dame Beatrice heard the front door being closed. The time was a quarter to three. At half-past three Detective Chief-Superintendent Robert Gavin was shown in.

"You were right, Dame B., but my blokes still have to prove it," he said. "They know how to keep their traps shut, up at Squire's Acre, and the Colonel and his nephew are standing shoulder to shoulder."

"A chain is only as strong as its weakest link, dear Robert, and the weakest link at Squire's Acre, from one point of view, is Mrs. Batty-Faudrey. But have you had any lunch?"

"Yes, thanks. I briefed the Inspector and the C.I.D. sergeant and pushed them off to the Hall, and then I lunched at *The Hat With Feather*, having told them to report to me there. That excellent pub kept back some lunch for them in a private room, so, when they'd had it, we got down to brass tacks."

He took out some papers and looked them through. Dame Beatrice bestowed upon his dark and close-cropped head the benign smile of a well-fed python.

"The report," he said, looking up at her, "is roughly this: on the night of the dress rehearsal of *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, the Batty-Faudreys dined with the Mayor, leaving Giles at home. This, of course, is at first-hand from the Mayor and Mayoress. While the Batty-Faudreys were out of the house, a man turned up and wanted to borrow a sword. The girl who opened the door to him confirms this and, having been shown a not-very-recent photograph of Luton—taken, unfortunately for us, completely surrounded by Sunday School teachers and scholars—says it *might* be the man who called, but she couldn't be sure. The only thing she remembers is that he was short and thin and said he was sorry to call so late, but that his business was important."

"Upon that, the girl went to consult Giles Faudrey, who was in the downstairs library."

“Yes. Interviewed separately, Giles and the girl both state that she was sent back to the door to ask what his business was, was told about the sword, returned to Giles and was ordered to show the visitor up to the long gallery.”

“And, after that, Giles’s previous story breaks down, I venture to think.”

“How right you are! He confesses that he did go up to the long gallery, and that he not only spoke very cordially to the visitor, but that he invited him to take two swords so that, in the stage production, they matched.”

“What a pity that they did not match, then! If Laura says that one sword was a theatrical property and the other a genuine weapon, I am prepared to back her judgment.”

“Yes, so am I, but, apart from that, the Inspector got on to Page and Ford—Collis and Carson, you know—and they’re ready to take their oath that there was only the one real sword among their stage properties, and that they tossed up to see which one should wear it.”

“What had Giles to say to that?”

“He bluffed it out. He stuck to it that two swords were borrowed. He also declared that Luton did not give his name to the girl who answered the door, and the girl confirms that. Both say, most emphatically, that they had never set eyes on Luton before—and that, of course, may be the truth, in the case of the girl.”

“I think very likely it is. I wonder just how great a villain young Mr. Faudrey is?”

“By which you mean that he may be blackmailing his uncle? Oh, I’m perfectly certain he is doing that, and that’s why it’s paying him not to give the old man away. My chaps did their utmost to break him down, but he fended them off. He stressed that he had nothing to do with the murders, insisted that they had another go at the members of the drama club, and told them that the criminal had hanged himself and that was that. They couldn’t shake him.”

“What had the Colonel to say?”

“He blustered, as you’d expect. Said that Giles had been sowing wild oats since he was sixteen and had been expelled from two schools for so doing. The Inspector asked for the names of the schools, and the Colonel rather weakly said he couldn’t remember them. Then he was asked for the name of Giles’s college, and that he gave readily enough. I can find out whether Giles was sent down and, if so, for what, but it won’t really help us. Then my chaps sounded the Colonel about his movements on the Friday when Spey was killed. He said he had no idea what he’d done or where he’d been, and damned them to perdition for daring to question him. He asked them what the hell they thought they were playing at, and threatened to report them—he didn’t say to whom. Upon this, they apologised for troubling him and told him that, as it was now established (which it isn’t, of course) that Gordon did not commit suicide, but was murdered, the police had no option but to turn the borough upside down and question everybody who might have the slightest bit of information to give.”

“And this satisfied the Colonel?”

“They said he certainly seemed a bit happier, but blustered again when they said they’d like to speak to his wife, so they agreed that he should stay in the room while she was questioned.”

“But he did not do so?”

“Now how do you know that?”

“I was asking a question, not making a statement.”

“Well, you seem to have made a shrewd guess, then. Mrs. Batty-Faudrey put on a *grande dame* act and became very haughty, so apparently the Colonel decided that she was more than equal to the situation, and slid out, leaving her to cope. This she did remarkably well.”

“Could *she* account for her movements on the evening of Spey’s death?”

“Yes, she could. She went to a Soroptimist meeting at which she introduced the speaker and acted as chairman.”

"So she cannot give an account of what Giles and the Colonel did at the time?"

"Not with any certainty. She thinks they watched television. She had invited the speaker and a couple of Soroptimist members to tea, a ceremony from which the Colonel and Giles had opted out, and she did not see either of the men again until she got back from her meeting. That, she thinks, was at about half-past ten, because, when the meeting was over, the Soroptimists threw a sherry party."

"Where was the meeting held?"

"At the Town Hall, because the Mayoress, who is a member, gave the sherry party in the Mayor's parlour."

"Oh, well, all that must be true, because it would be so easy to check on it. Besides, whoever the guilty person may be, it cannot be Mrs. Batty-Faudrey."

"No, I don't think it could possibly be a woman at all, because of the nature of the crimes."

"I wonder at what point it was suggested to Mr. Spey that he should retain his Henry VIII costume in order to be photographed wearing it?"

"The only person who might have been able to tell us is Gordon, and, of course, he is dead. I still don't see why there was such a long gap between Spey's death and his own."

"Oh, I explained that to Laura. Mr. Perse's second pageant was seen as a trap, and, so far as the murderer knew, Gordon was the only person who could spring it. Gordon's murder was a panic measure, so, of course, was Spey's. It is highly probable that neither man had an inkling of the murderer's identity."

"Why should he have thought Spey had?"

"Spey must have lingered in the Town Hall for a little while after Gordon had gone over to the public house. The murderer's guilty conscience did the rest."

"So he has a conscience, has he?"

"His wife has seen to that. The next thing is to interview the girl on whose behalf Mr. Luton tackled Giles Faudrey on the night of the dress rehearsal."

"You think Luton believed that the girl laid her ruin at Giles Faudrey's door, as the saying is?"

"Oh, no. I am sure that Mr. Luton had extracted the correct information from the girl and had expected to confront the Colonel with his evidence. Finding nobody but Giles at home, he confided it to him instead, and Giles, who is a thorough-paced young scoundrel, saw a golden opportunity to blackmail his uncle in return for keeping the bad news from his aunt."

"You'd think that the old man would have murdered the girl if only he'd had the opportunity."

"He cannot have had the opportunity, but, apart from that, I am quite certain that Mr. Luton was able to assure Giles that nobody else—not even the girl's mother—knew the truth. The girl's mother believed that Giles was the baby's father."

"Then why didn't she denounce him?"

"Why should she, when the money was coming in so regularly?—the Colonel's money, of course."

"You don't know that for certain, though, do you?"

"I thought it was perfectly obvious, but you could find out."

Laura returned half an hour after her husband had left the house.

"Oh," she said, "so Gavin's been here, has he? I smell his pipe. What does he think about things?"

"He is convinced that Giles Faudrey is a blackmailer and that Colonel Batty-Faudrey is a murderer."

"Ah, that's what I was coming to. It can't be true, you know. The whole thing's out of character."

"In what way, child?"

"In every way. I can see why the Colonel might have murdered Falstaff, and, in a panic, thought he'd better get

rid of Spey and Gordon. But why the elaboration? Why put Falstaff and basket in the Thames? Why decapitate Henry VIII and hang Edward III from the Druid's Oak?"

"I thought we had settled all that."

"If the murderer was Giles Faudrey, yes, but not if he's the Colonel."

"Much more so. The Colonel, as an old campaigner, is not destitute of cunning, nor is he afraid of a little bloodshed. It is because he has the name for being..."

"An old stick-in-the-mud?"

"Yes, if you care to phrase it so—that the ritualistic nature of his behaviour (after the straightforward killing was done) would deflect suspicion from him. Your own reactions give me the impression that his instinct in the matter was sound. Incidentally, there was a little more in it than that."

"But why go to the length of murdering people? Why didn't he stick to stout denial—always a sound defence, so long as you don't weaken."

"He did not think that stout denial would stand him in good stead if his *peccadillo* came to the ears of Mrs. Batty-Faudrey. She had already seen him with a girl on his knee when Mr. Luton (inadvertently or not) turned the lights up at an unfortunate moment during the masque at Squire's Acre Hall some two years ago. She is not the woman either to forgive or forget such an episode."

"You mean his name was mud with her, and she'd have been only too ready to believe he'd got that servant of theirs into trouble? But, after all, what was he scared of? These things have been hushed up before and they'll be hushed up again."

"He was terrified of the divorce court."

"But surely, for her own sake, Mrs. Batty-Faudrey wouldn't really have gone as far as that!"

"Well, it is my firm conviction that the Colonel thought she would. And, remember, he probably has nothing to live on but his Army pension. His wife owns Squire's Acre and

holds the purse-strings, as she pointed out at that lunch we gave her.”

“Poor wretched old man!” said Laura. “Well, the police have yet to find out how the murder of Gordon was contrived. What did you mean, by the way, when you said, a while ago, that there was a little more in it than an attempt at camouflage when he did those strange and rather beastly things with the bodies?”

“I have already explained that. Think back a little.”

“Oh—success or non-success with women! All the Colonel could do was to take a willing turtle-dove on his knee in a darkened chamber, and get a servant-girl, who was either too terrified or too flattered to prevent it, with child. Well, I wonder what the end of it will be? The local police aren’t going to like the idea of arresting him, you know.”

The local police were not faced with this unpleasant necessity. Gavin called next day with the news that the girl had named the Colonel, and not Giles, as the father of her baby, and that the Colonel had blown his brains out.

“Giles has been arrested as an accessory after the fact,” added Gavin. “There’s no doubt the Colonel may have needed help in getting Spey’s body to the private road where it was found, but, even if he didn’t, Giles must have known about the murder of Spey, since both he and his uncle were together at Squire’s Acre that night. As for stringing up Gordon, well, there it is almost certain two men must have been involved.”

“Has anything more come to light concerning the death of Gordon?” asked Dame Beatrice.

“No, it hasn’t, so far as actual proof is concerned, but I think we are entitled to guess what must have happened. Gordon was very much in evidence, it seems, during Perse’s pageant. He was with his class, watching the Romans at the bottom of Ferry Lane in the morning, and he was with the children again at the Garter ceremony in the Town Hall. We

think he was followed home by Giles and persuaded—probably didn't really need persuasion—to show up at the Butts for the eighteenth-century election. He could have been throttled there under cover of the riot between the louts and the Grammar School. It was practically, if not quite, dark by the time that fight got under way, I'm told. We know Giles was at the Butts at the beginning of the affair, probably spying out the lie of the land. Of course, we shall never be able to prove whether we're right about this, unless Giles chooses to come clean, and I doubt whether he will."

"The Colonel may have left a confession which implicates Giles," suggested Laura.

Her husband shook his head.

"If he did, it's been destroyed," he said. "We've searched Squire's Acre thoroughly. By the way, Laura, when you found the head you might also have found the axe. We had to do a lot of dredging for it, but it turned up all right in the end."

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

The Special Sub-Committee Disbands

“...should be grateful for their diligence in setting down, and preserving these details of the life of the old town at a time when the whole country was passing through internal troubles of a most serious nature.”

It was a year or two later.

“It having been signified by the powers that be,” said Alderman Topson, the chairman, “as how we are soon to lose our identity as a separate borough and be merged with the towns of Gistleward and Hansbury Heath in accordance with some...”

“Bloody nonsense!” interpolated Councillor Beaton.

“Some interference enacted by them as ought to have their heads examined, it becomes our duty, being the special-appointed sub-committee for the purpose, to seek ways and means of bringing the said merger to the attention of the public, most of which is apathetic to the point at issue. The Chair is open to any suggestions.”

“It won’t do a scrap of good. The whole thing is signed, sealed and settled,” said Councillor Perry. He had touched off gunpowder.

“It’s a crying shame, that’s what it is!”

“It’s a politician’s bit of homework, no doubt about that!”

“There’s no damn’ sense in it!”

"We were a market town when Gistleward and Hansbury Heath were a couple of little villages!"

"We'll be losing our very name, next thing you know. It's iniquitous! It didn't ever ought to have been allowed. Them as did it should be strung up on lamp-posts!"

"Can't be done! Hanging's finished, and what I say—"

"This," said the chairman, "is not going to get us nowhere. Suggestions is what we're asked for, not a lot of belly-aching about something as can't be helped. I'm agreeable with all that's been said, but that ain't what we're here for. Now, who's going to make a suggestion?"

"What about an inter-district sports day? I reckon our schoolchildren could make rings round all of theirs."

"Ah, they could do that all right, and we could follow it up with a swimming gala. What have we got a Public Baths for?"

"That's all too ordinary. We want something more striking. What about tolling the church bells and having a service on funeral lines, with hymns appropriate?"

"Why don't we have a town crier to go round and say we're going to cut down the Druid's Oak and make a bonfire of the logs? Symbolic, if you see what I mean."

"You don't want a *bonfire* of the logs. Auction 'em off, is what I say. Make very nice souvenirs, they would, and the money could go towards a tea for the old folks, with black-edged invitation cards and a chocolate cake as centrepiece."

"A competition for the best letter sent to the local newspaper saying what people think about the merger, and advising them not to mince their adjectives."

"A bit dicey, that idea," said the chairman. "An action for libel might be brought. I should have to ask the Town Clerk."

"You might be able to persuade one of the Sunday papers to print the letters, if they were sufficiently scurrilous," said Councillor Perse, who, tongue in cheek, had

proposed the competition. "Or the B.B.C. might be interested—in a different way, of course. *Panorama* might give us a spotlight, or perhaps *Tonight* would do it. There's been a lot of feeling about these mergers. I don't believe the public is as apathetic as you say, especially if rates go up."

"We could lobby our M.P. and see if he couldn't do something for us. These plans haven't happened yet. There might still be time to get things altered, don't you reckon? Seems to me..."

"Don't you believe it! It's all cut and dried, I tell you! All we can do is make Gistleward and Hansbury Heath damned well sit up and take notice!"

"Now, look," said the chairman, "this sub-committee is on the wrong lines. We got to be constructive. All you're doing is fashioning spanners to throw into the works. You won't stop the machinery, but you *will* make for a lot of nasty ill-feeling. Now, let's make a fresh start. We can show we disapprove without going out of our way to get ourself disliked. I daresay Gistleward and Hansbury Heath feel just the same as we do, if the truth was only known. It's up to us, I reckon, although strongly disapproving, to act like gents and ladies and not lose none of our dignity."

"Well, then, to mark the occasion of the merger, what about excusing all the Council tenants a full week's rent?"

"That," said the chairman austerely, "would lead to rejoicing, not disapproval, so that suggestion is Out. Now, then, Alderman Mrs. Skifforth, I don't think *you've* spoke yet."

"No, I haven't. I've got an idea, but I don't think I'll put it forward. I don't know, on thinking it over, how it will be received," said the newly-created Alderman.

"Oh, come, now! Make a contribution," urged the chairman. "It's up to all of us to put forward any suggestions."

"I'd really rather not."

“Well, then, before we go any further,” said a Councillor who happened also to be the landlord of *The Hat With Feather*, “while the Alderman is making up her mind—which, as the only lady member of this sub-committee, I’m sure her ideas would be most welcome—I think, if you’d just stretch out from where you’re sitting, Councillor Perse, there’s some sherry in that cupboard, which, with permission of the Chair...” he looked enquiringly at Topson...“we might possibly sample while we’re waiting. Whisky for them that prefers, and there’s plenty of bottled beer.”

“Well, thank *you*, Councillor Selby,” said the chairman. “After all, it’s a poor heart that never rejoices, as they say, and, of course, this merger *might* help out with the rates. Gistleward’s mostly residential, but there’s plenty of shops and factories in Hansbury Heath. I declare the meeting adjourned *pro tem* for twenty minutes. After that we’ll have to get on. There’s a full Council meeting at nine.”

Whether or not two glasses of excellent sherry played any part in the matter, it transpired, after the interval, that Alderman Mrs. Skifforth had abandoned her show of reluctance and was prepared to share her thoughts with the meeting.

“I wondered,” she said, “whether we could have a torch-light procession—real torches, I mean, not electric bulb things—and beat the bounds for the very last time. I thought it would make a nice ending.”

“I like that idea. It’s classy,” said the chairman. “It’s poetical and it’s local and it’s historic, and, whatever else we think of, we ought to include it in. Those in favour? Thank you. Carried unanimous.” He stared hard at Mr. Perse, but that gentleman had raised a languid hand. “Well, now, anything else? We’ll have to be careful who’s to be handed the job of carrying them torches, by the way.”

“It ought to be the Mayor and Corporation,” said Mr. Perse, “and then, if the borough goes up in smoke, the accumulated rates will come in useful for re-building.”

The chairman rapped on the table with his knuckles.

"Order! Order! Any more suggestions?" he demanded. "Time's getting on, and *frivolious* comment is out of place. Now, then. We haven't got very far yet."

"I vote we do the *whole thing* in the evening. What was that play where the chap took the head round in a hat-box?" asked Councillor Perry.

"Do *you* mind?" pleaded Alderman Mrs. Skifforth. "We've had enough of that sort of thing in Brayne, I should have thought!"

"No offence. The title was all I meant. *What* was that thing called now? I took my missus to see it. It give her nightmares. Night...night..."

"*Night Must Fall*," said Councillor Perse.

"That's it. So in the evening we beat the bounds by torch-light, like the Alderman says, and then, when night has done falling, as you may say, why not follow up with fireworks in the park? Everybody likes fireworks."

"Ah, that's it, fireworks," said Councillor Selby. "A set piece of the Queen to finish up with, and we could floodlight the Mayor in his chain and robes and get a couple of planes to write *Brayne For Ever* right across the sky."

"Followed by singing *Auld Lang Syne*."

"*Abide With Me*, I reckon."

"*Lead, Kindly Light* 'ud be more like it, wouldn't it?"

"Procession of boats on the river, with lanterns and that, and the *Eton Boating Song*."

"Why the *Eton Boating Song*? Eton's nothing to do with us," said Councillor Beaton.

The Councillor who had suggested it hummed the tune.

"I thought that was the old-fashioned waltz," said Beaton. "I done some of my courting to that tune."

"Never mind that," said Councillor Briggs. "What about a daylight procession of narrow-boats on the canal, with prizes for the best decorated?"

"You'd never get the bargees wised up to it in time," objected Councillor Yaffle.

"Look here," said Councillor Perse, if you *really* want to keep Brayne's name on the map, why shouldn't the Council make an offer to buy Squire's Acre, and hand it over to the National Trust?"

There was a momentary silence. It was broken by the chairman.

"Well," he said, "I must say I like that idea, but what would it run us into? It's the rate-payers' money, you know."

"We should need to buy the grounds as well as the Hall," said Alderman Mrs. Skifforth, "and turn them into a public park."

"Why the National Trust? We could develop the Hall for dances and receptions and that, and make a bit of money," said Councillor Selby. "Get it licenced, p'raps."

"Serve teas on the terrace and the lawn."

"Put down some tennis courts and a couple of bowling greens."

"Let the art club give an annual exhibition in the long gallery."

"Use it as a skittle alley."

"We've always wondered where a branch library could be put. This is the answer," said Perse.

"I wouldn't be surprised if Mrs. Batty-Faudrey wouldn't be thankful to be quit of the place. She don't live there any more, so she might consider a really reasonable figure," said Councillor Yaffle.

"We could name it Brayne Old Hall. That would keep the borough on the map, I reckon," said Councillor Beaton.

"Have to do it before this ruddy merger comes in, then, otherwise Gistleward and Hansbury Heath might want to have a finger in the pie," said Councillor Briggs.

"If we do it, they'll never get over it!"

"Brayne Old Hall! We must tie the new name up legal. I bet Gistleward won't half be wild!"

“A truce to this inter-tribal warfare,” said Mr. Perse.
“Does anybody know what kind of figure Mrs. Batty-Faudrey is likely to have in mind, if we can persuade her to sell Squire’s Acre?”

“If she knows it’s for the Council, she’ll stick the price up,” said Councillor Selby.

“Then we must approach her privately,” said Mr. Perse.

“As through who?” asked the chairman, suspiciously, noting a smirk of self-approval on Mr. Perse’s countenance.
“Well, we can report all this to the full Council. Meanwhile, I declare the meeting closed. Well, thank you, Councillor Selby. I don’t mind if I do.”

About the Author



Gladys Mitchell was born in the village of Cowley, Oxford, in April 1901. She was educated at the Rothschild School in Brentford, the Green School in Isleworth, and at Goldsmiths and University Colleges in London. For many years Miss Mitchell taught history and English, swimming, and games. She retired from this work in 1950 but became so bored without the constant stimulus and irritation of teaching that she accepted a post at the Matthew Arnold School in Staines, where she taught English and history, wrote the annual school play, and coached hurdling. She was a member of the Detection Club, the PEN, the Middlesex Education Society, and the British Olympic Association. Her

father's family are Scots, and a Scottish influence has appeared in some of her books.